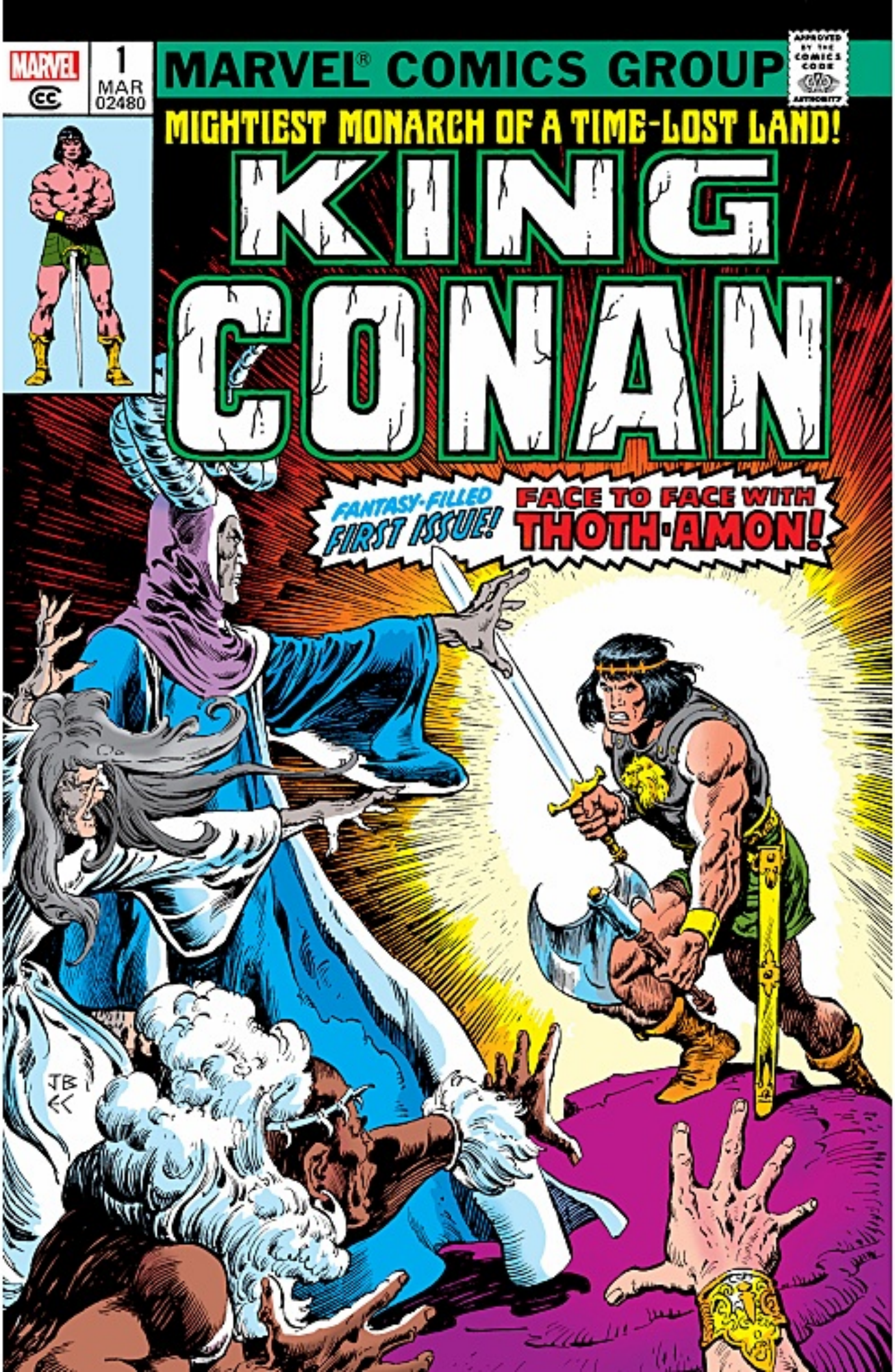
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MIGHTIEST MONARCH OF A TIME-LOST LAND!
KING CONAN
FANTASY-FILLED FIRST ISSUE!
FACE TO FACE WITH THOTH-AMON!

CONAN THE KING

THE ORIGINAL MARVEL YEARS

VOLUME 1

ROY THOMAS • DOUG MOENCH • ALAN ZELENETZ
JOHN BUSCEMA • MARC SILVESTRI

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CONAN THE KING

VOLUME 1

KING CONAN #1-19

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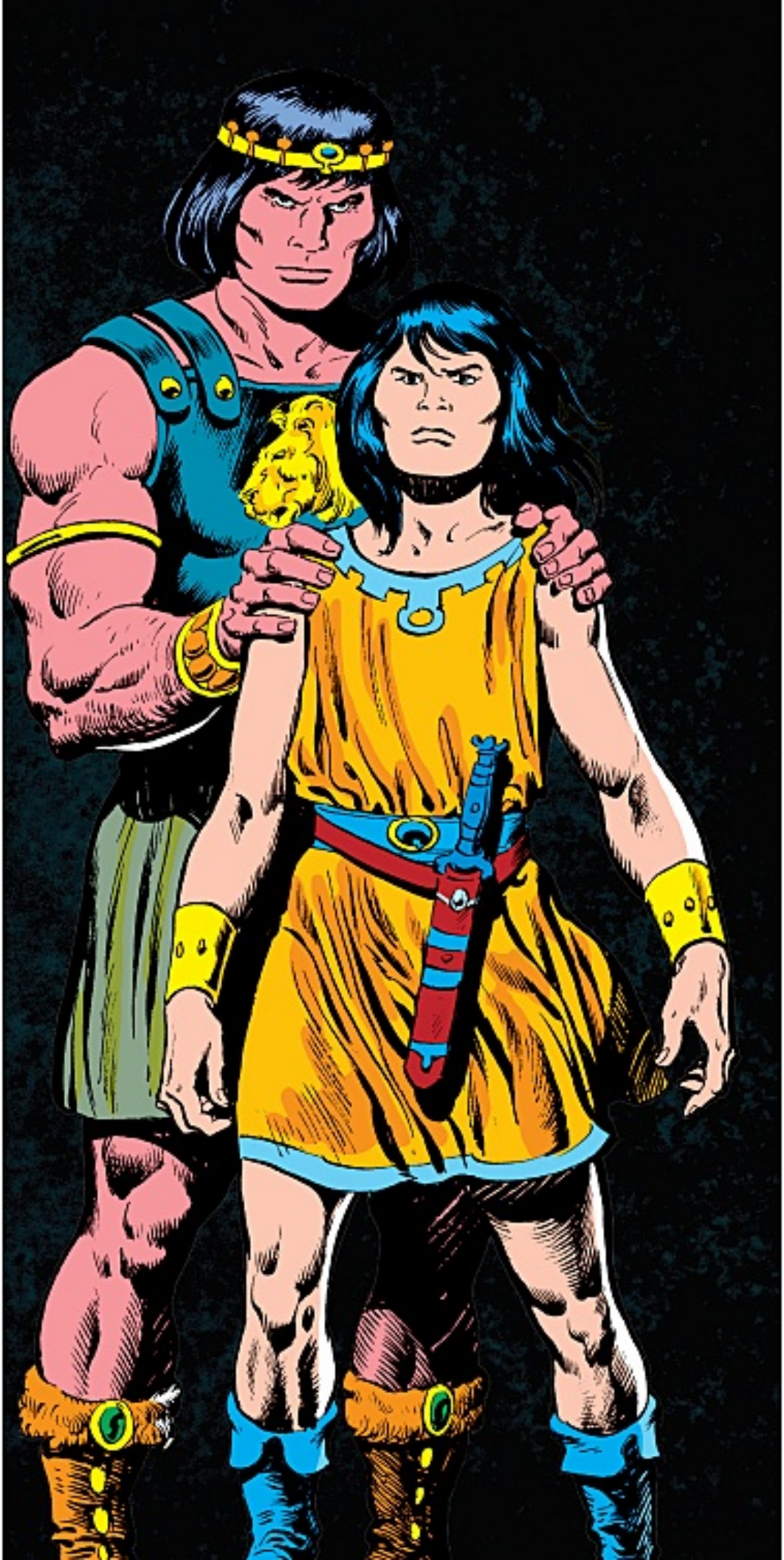


INTRODUCTION

BY ROY THOMAS

By mid-1979, Marvel's Conan comics had become a well-oiled money-making machine...which is precisely what a comics company wants any franchise to be, whether Spider-Man or Superman or Archie Andrews.

Of course, to some of us, Conan was rather *more* than that. Ten years earlier, artist John Buscema had proclaimed, upon reading the Conan paperback I'd sent him, that this was the kind of thing he'd been waiting to draw all his life. And I myself had quickly evolved from considering the fictional hero simply an interesting and potentially profitable licensed property for Marvel to becoming both a fan and champion of Robert E. Howard's work.

Still, it was Conan's success in monthly magazines—first the color *Conan the Barbarian*, then the black-and-white *Savage Sword of Conan*—that led to the natural desire to expand the Cimmerian's comics reign still further.

I've little doubt the suggestion that Marvel launch a comic about Conan as king of Aquilonia was mine. After all, by his own oft-profession, my publisher/mentor Stan Lee had only a fuzzy notion of what Conan was all about; and, once *Barbarian* had achieved sales success within a year or so of its debut (though most definitely due to some canny suggestions of Stan's), I was mostly left alone to guide the hero's four-color destiny.

That coincided with my desire to increasingly remove myself from involvement with Marvel's super hero titles in favor of my own little corner consisting of the Conan-related titles (including *Red Sonja*), the World-War-II-set *Invaders*, and the alternate worlds of *What If?*—much as I loved Marvel's mainstream heroes. But *Sonja* and *Invaders*, alas, fell victim to cancellation, and I'd bailed on *What If?* after a couple of years; so, on top of the *Thor* series I'd recently taken on, I could use another non-mainstream assignment to earn my writer/editor fee.

So *King Conan* was a natural step for me—and thus for Marvel—to take.

Where *Barbarian* followed its black-maned protagonist's life from youth onward, and *Savage Sword* leaped back and forth in time to deal with any part of his life I felt like exploring, *King Conan* would deal with the Cimmerian's life as ruler of the foremost civilized kingdom of REH's Hyborian Age.

After all, the pulp-magazine Conan prose stories had begun in 1932 with two yarns of him as king: "The Phoenix on the Sword" and "The Scarlet Citadel"... while Howard's later novel *The Hour of the Dragon* (later rechristened *Conan the Conqueror*) had dealt, like them, with a King Conan dethroned by sorcerous treachery and battling to regain the throne he himself had originally usurped.

Additionally, I myself had both adapted and made up stories of the barbarian as monarch—including fleshing out the recent L. Sprague de Camp/Lin Carter novel *Conan the Liberator* in *Savage Sword* (detailing how he gained the crown) and penning as *Conan Annuals* a pair of original exploits that were sequels to *Dragon/Conqueror*.

I'll admit, I never had the same enthusiasm for Conan as sovereign as for Conan the soldier-of-fortune/pirate/thief. Still, I liked writing about the ol' sword-slinger.

It took only a brief conversation with Stan to get *King Conan* on the schedule. I suspect then-editor-in-chief Jim Shooter was also involved, and rightly so, even if comics I wrote and/or edited weren't under his control, since by contract I was responsible only to Stan.

It was ultimately Stan's decision that *King Conan* begin life as a quarterly with 48 interior pages rather than the usual 32. That was fine by me, since it meant stories would be 36 or so pages long.

And I'd have no trouble filling those pages, at least for the first couple of years, because de Camp

and Carter had recently written a quartet of stories about King Conan and his son Conn (actually short for "Conan," since he had the same birth-name as his father), collected in the paperback *Conan of Aquilonia*. If sales were good, I knew Stan would bump the frequency up to monthly, which would mean 70-plus pages a year more to handle.

Little did I know! As Robert E. Howard wrote in his fantasy story "Marchers of Valhalla": "Man may look back for ten thousand years; he can not look forward, even for an instant."

So I plunged into the work, sending our chosen artist John Buscema a copy of *Conan of Aquilonia* and phoning him briefly about the new comic. I knew each of its four stories would adapt nicely into a 36-ish-page adventure, so there were just a few details to decide. To wit:

The title: I wrote somewhere that Jim Shooter and I settled (with Stan's concurrence) on my suggestion, *King Conan*, as the title. The prevailing wisdom at that time was that it was better that the name of each of the three Conan series begin with a different letter, so they couldn't potentially get confused in wholesalers' checklists.

The look of Conan and Conn: Conan should appear a bit older and grayer, but otherwise retain his established look. In *Aquilonia*, he sported a beard, but I vetoed that as anti-commercial. Conn would be a young version of his dad, though not the physical warrior Conan had been at his age, since he was raised in a palace, not in the rugged hills of Cimmeria.

How to ease the reader into the new series in issue #1: That was solved with a symbolic splash, followed by a two-page spread that briefly recounted the hero's life to that point, from wanderer to king, with a sizable image of Conan and young Conn on the second of the pages.

The stories' inker/embellisher: With Shooter's consent, I opted for longtime *Barbarian* embellisher Ernie Chan, the more so since by then John was providing only layouts, not full pencils, and Ernie had proven adept at translating those into finished artwork. (For reasons I don't recall, Ernie was spelled on #2-5 by Danny Bulanadi; that worked out well, also.)

So we were off and running.

I don't recall why, but I provided less textual material for #1 than I'd often done, though its half-page text piece said what needed to be said. There was no text piece in #2, though by #3 there was a one-page letters section. The fourth issue, oddly, lacks a letters page, replaced by a pair of Conan pinups. As for why that happened:

Around that time, it abruptly became clear to me I wouldn't be signing a third three-year contract with Marvel, since the powers that be had decided there'd be no more "writer/editor" positions at Marvel, and I had informed them I'd sign no other kind there. So, sparing the details, I reluctantly accepted a long-standing offer from DC Comics (even though it, too, was only a writer contract) and reluctantly left both Conan and Marvel behind, foreseeably forever.

Because I knew (from very recent experience

on *Barbarian*) I wouldn't be allowed to mention my departure on a *King Conan* letters page, I expect I elected to simply toss pinups into the back of issues #4-5. (The "few" instead of "one" was because the "King Conan" stories had shrunk to 32-33 pages long. Such pinups would continue through at least #8.)

About issue #4: I wasn't really wild about de Camp & Carter's "Shadows in the Skull" that we adapted. I had no quarrel with their killing off Thoth-Amon, whom they and I had separately evolved into Conan's sorcerous arch-enemy—though he'd been only an offstage presence in REH's tales—but I disliked the fact that (spoilers), in the end, it was Conn's hand, not his sire's, that struck the Stygian wizard the fatal blow. Still, I saw no reason to alter that action, since the de Camp/Carter version was already in print.

Life moves on.

By the time Marvel and I (thankfully temporarily) called it quits in fall of 1980, I had managed to adapt into comics form just about every prose Conan story written by Howard, de Camp, and/or Carter to that date—plus one short story conceived by Björn Nyberg.

Nyberg was a Swede who, in the 1950s, had just sat down and written a novel he titled *The Return of Conan*. It dealt with events not long after King Conan wed the slave girl Zenobia, whom he'd vowed at the end of *Hour of the Dragon* to make "queen of Aquilonia." In Nyberg's tale, vile winged creatures controlled by even viler Eastern sorcerers carry off Zenobia and others of his court—so naturally Conan puts his kingship on hold to ride off and rescue them all. Nyberg's manuscript, heavily edited and officially co-authored by de Camp, had been published in hardcover, then in paperback under the more dramatic title *Conan the Avenger*.

And that was the saga I chose to adapt as *King Conan* #5-8, after a couple of introductory pages that followed events in #4. Those four issues became a story that Count Trocero told young Prince Conn over a campfire.

The credits of #5 still list me as "writer/editor," but there's a new byline as well: "Louise Jones, consulting editor." Louise, whom I'd known somewhat casually for roughly a decade, would become the full editor with #6, but even with #5 Marvel took over all handling of the covers; the first that I saw of them was when I bought copies of the comic off the racks in Los Angeles.

In addition, all proofreading was now done in Marvel's offices; I wasn't sent a copy of the finished story to proof as before. This was unfortunate because in issue #5 no one made certain that the double page spread on story pages 4-5 faced each other! Unfortunately, the top halves of those pages comprised a single panel—whose continuity was now shattered because the reader would naturally read the two panels at the bottom of page 4 before turning the page. But there were virtually no editorial changes to the story in #5...nor would there be to #6-8.

I've left the discussion of the Nyberg/de Camp storyline till last. Aficionados tend to agree that *Avenger* is one of the lesser tales in what was then the official Conan canon.

The story itself mostly passes muster. In it, Conan finally dispatches Turan's King Yezdigerd—another offstage presence in REH's body of work that de Camp, Carter and I had amplified into a major foe of Conan's. Well enough, I suppose—but then comes the novel's climax. Suddenly, the god Crom appears to Conan and restores the strength and life that had been draining from this warrior who had "always been true" to him. This struck the more aware readers, both in the 1960s and since, as a distinctly un-Howardian touch. It flew in the face of what Conan had said to Bêlit in "Queen of the Black Coast"—that it was "no use to call on [Crom]; he will send you doom, not fortune."

Again, because the events of *Avenger* were part of the official canon at the time, I used them. In retrospect, I wish I'd at least had Conan wonder if his face-to-face with Crom had really happened, or been only a brief dream that gave him strength to win a battle. After all, years before, Barry and I had made substantial changes when adapting the REH yarn "The God in the Bowl"—and I had altered the climax of Buscema's and my rendition of *Hour of the Dragon* so Conan could be in on the death of the wizard Xaltotun. But, for whatever reasons, I let the events of *Conan the Avenger* stand.

I can only hope the ghost of Two-Gun Bob Howard forgives me.

And then I was done. A decade of writing and editing Conan's first comic book adventures had come to an end...for good, far as I could tell. I could hardly look ahead ten years, to see I'd be invited back then to script most of the Cimmerian's final decade at Marvel the first time around. It's just as well. Sometimes the future wouldn't be as much fun if we knew it was coming.

People occasionally ask me where I'd have gone with *King Conan* if I'd stuck around in 1980. Hard to say, because by the time I finished #8, I knew I was leaving, so there were no synopses or even scribbled notes lying around for #9 and beyond.

There was, at most, the hint at the end of #8, when Conn asks Trocero if Conan and Zenobia's homeward trek was as eventful as his father's rescue journey had been.

To which Conan—having approached unseen—responds: "Almost, son."

So I suppose I might've gone off into another round of recollections—maybe narrated by Conan himself this time—for several issues. Still, I doubt I would have. There were no "post-*Avenger*" homeward tales by Nyberg, de Camp, or others to adapt...so I suspect I'd have bit the bullet (or rather, the blade) and written all-new adventures of the usurper king.

Would those barely contemplated *King Conan* issues have been the equal of what would actually follow, as related by my buddy Doug Moench and others? Hard for me to say...unless one of these days I run across the all-revealing mirrors of Tuzun Thune for sale on eBay.

2021

Roy Thomas considers his ten-year run on the Conan comics to be his major achievement at Marvel—and definitely the most fun he had there!

THE PAGE MANIA

BY DOUG MOENCH

I've had many hungers in my time, but one has always been insatiable, a manic craving for more pages. Meatier stories with more plot, more characterization, more action, bigger panels, more breathing room. And surely this derives from the deprivation of starting out at Warren Publishing.

The Warren titles—*Creepy*, *Eerie* and *Vampirella*—were horror anthologies in the black-and-white magazine format, slightly larger in size and containing many more pages than a traditional comic book. The larger page count, however, was merely overall—and divvied up between some seven or eight different stories per issue, all modeled on the same simplistic pattern established by the EC Comics horror and science fiction stories of the fifties. Setup, complication and twist-ending sting. Bim, bam, boom, in and out with no extraneous detail, no wasted time or space. Warren writers were accordingly instructed to submit scripts limited to five, six or seven-page stories, nine pages max in extraordinarily exceptional cases, and never ever breaching the double-digit page barrier.

Which is why I fully expected rejection upon submitting the first magnum opus of my career, a vampire tale clocking in at some fifteen (!) pages. My submission note explained that this flagrant rule violation was not at all deliberate or defiant but simply the way it turned out. Indeed, this gargantuan script had been written the same way I'd produced all my other, shorter stories. It was a simple "writing process," I explained, of plucking the glimmer or ghost of some fleeting notion from the Great Idea Stream, scribbling down a few initial words, and then lapsing into a frenzied trance of automatic writing all the way to the end. This time the end was just farther away, that's all.

I wasn't lying in that note. The massive expansion in length really had not been planned or deliberate, which meant that some subconscious rebellion had obviously altered my usual process, somehow invading and inflating the trance stage of automatic writing. I knew I'd long been chafing against all the length limitations and restrictions, craving less crammed exposition, more involved and naturally evolved plot, at least some characterization and more than a single jolt of climactic action. But I'd also been repressing these instinctive feelings in order to sell my wares. Now something had abruptly shifted. A dam had burst. A certain type of abandon and freedom had been unlocked, as if I'd stumbled into something simple yet profound. The story felt more rounded and comfortable at its greater length. It even featured a whole two and a half pages of detailed action, a gloriously choreographed splurge of fangs, fists, stakes and crosses. It felt epic and thrilling. But also dangerous, insofar as selling my wares was concerned.

To my great surprise, Warren bought it. And to my even greater shock, they actually doubled the payment. (But don't tell anyone!) See, unlike other publishers, Warren paid by the story rather than by the page—a measly $25 per script, whether for five pages or seven. If you were dumb enough to conceive some extraordinary exception warranting the maximum length of nine pages, that was on you and you still got the measly twenty-five bucks. But this, my first magnum opus, scored the huge sum of *fifty 1970 dollars*. This made me seriously rich. (But don't ever do it again!)

More pages, more fun, more satisfaction—and more moolah to boot. It was a dangerous lesson to learn but one I would never forget.

Marvel lured me away from Warren a couple of years later, so now the stories were longer—seventeen pages per issue for a regular color title at that time—but I still felt cramped. *Master of Kung Fu* was definitely the pride and joy of my early Marvel work, but I had more fun luxuriating in two black-and-white magazine titles. *Planet of the Apes* enabled me to do two stories per issue of twenty or more pages each, and the first issue of *Doc Savage* sprawled across a truly magnificent stretch of 52 pages. The comfort zone at last, a.k.a. Page-Length Heaven.

Close to ten years after my first-ever comics story, a dinky seven-pager for *Eerie*, Warren's new editor Louise Jones gave me a call. I'm pretty sure this was after my girlfriend (now wife) Debra and I had gone to a party at the place Louise shared with Walter Simonson out in Queens, so we already knew each other slightly.

Things were very different at Warren, Louise assured me, so much so that she could now beat my Marvel page rate.

"I'm flattered, Louise, but I really don't want to leave Marvel."

"Call me 'Weezie,'" she said, "and I'm not trying to steal you back. I just wondered if you could do one story for me."

I launched into an explication of my Page-Mania addiction. "I'm not even sure I'd be capable of doing a seven-page story."

Weezie laughed. "I was thinking that maybe you and Paul Gulacy could try something new for the Warren books—a much longer story serialized in ten-page chunks across three issues of *Creepy* or *Eerie*."

"A 30-page Warren story?"

Weezie said yup and I said bingo.

Once Paul and I got fairly deep into the story, we realized it would be better with a little more action and some larger panels here and there. We asked for four additional pages of what we called "breathing room," which Weezie granted without hesitation, and the 34-page "Blood on Black Satin" appeared in three consecutive issues of *Eerie*. Paul inked his own pencils to produce truly magnificent art, some of the best work he's ever done.

Not long after that came the official announcement that Louise Jones was transplanting her editorial (and writing) skills from Warren to Marvel. Oh hey, thinks me, maybe we'll bump into each other in the Bullpen.

Which is when the phone rang and Weezie asked: "Twitching for more breathing room?"

I'm pretty sure I knew where the conversation was headed but played dumb with a "Huh?" anyway.

"I'm the new editor of *King Conan*," Weezie explained, "and each issue is 38 pages of big-story breathing room."

It was indeed where I suspected Weezie might be headed, since Roy Thomas and I were pals and I knew he was leaving Marvel. Roy may have even encouraged me to pursue the *King Conan* gig. Now I wouldn't even have to do that; I could just say yes.

There was one thing I should know, Louise said. I would not be doing any adaptations of existing stories by Robert E. Howard, L. Sprague de Camp or anyone else. Instead, I would have to deliver convincing pastiches—faithful renderings of the characters (as well as the overall spirit of Howard) within the context of all-new stories. To me, this was a plus rather than a minus—and since Weezie was offering a steady diet of mucho pages, real teeth-sinkers on a regular basis, of course I said yes.

My introduction to the *Kull the Savage: The Original Marvel Years Omnibus* contained heresy if not sacrilege. I actually confessed to preferring Kull over Conan. Only as a writer, obviously, hardly as a reader. Indeed, the original Robert E. Howard Conan stories are vastly superior and far more numerous than his relatively paltry Kull output. Whereas the young and lusty Conan was impulsively hotheaded and rarely reflective, there was something darker and deeper in Kull, a fatalistic world-weary ennui probably closer to my own temperament. It's probably also why I prefer Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich over Clara Bow or Mae West. Between Kull and Conan, the writer in me finds more angles and coloration in a complex king than a carefree kid. But once Conan matures and acquires more wisdom, he too becomes a king as well as a more nuanced character closer to Kull.

In *King Conan*, then, I'd have the best of both worlds. Not to mention pages galore.

My first issue, #9, was drawn by a fellow sufferer of Page Mania. Indeed, other than Jack Kirby, John Buscema could spit pages like nobody's business. That first 52-page Doc Savage story was a good example, but the best example was a little something called *Warriors of the Shadow-Realm*. This was *Weirdworld* by another name (due to some legal dispute) and it started when Ralph Macchio asked for a 30-odd page *Weirdworld* story to headline a one-shot black-and-white magazine. I complied. The resulting story was deemed acceptable

and the project proceeded apace. Until it all blew up in spectacular fashion.

First, I was told the format was being changed to the very opposite of black-and-white. Indeed, we were now slated to become Marvel's very first foray into the eye-popping extravaganza of full-process full-color. Much of the color, in fact, would be airbrushed directly onto the original artwork. Next, we were expanding from a one-shot to three editions, each featuring thirty-odd pages of story.

So, sez me, you need two more thirty-odd page *Weirdworld* stories?

Nope, I was told. "It's just one long serialized story, the one you already wrote, but now it'll be broken into thirds and spread across three issues."

Huh? So who's writing the other sixty-odd pages?

"No one. Your story is perfect other than being a bit dense and too crammed for the original page length."

So...?

"So we gave it to John Buscema and told him to do it exactly as written other than ignoring your page breaks. He's just doing a lot of big panels whenever and wherever he thinks they'd be cool until it all amounts to a hundred pages or so. He's having a real ball."

And how. This bizarre process is how a single panel can become a full-page pinup. It's also how many a single panel became many a double-page spread. It's even how a single panel became a three-page foldout. Twice. In the case of the two foldouts, two panels—amounting to one-third of a page—were expanded into six pages. In which case, given iffy math, John Buscema apparently drew eighteen times what I wrote for those two three-page spreads—if only three times what I wrote overall. "Only." But did I complain? Well, unlike Warren when I started, you'll recall, Marvel paid by the page. My voucher for thirty-odd pages became a check for a hundred. No, I did not complain. Thanks, John!

And now here we were on *King Conan*, two Page Maniacs united again, although Weezie put her foot down. I could not exceed my allotment of pages per issue, she insisted, nor could John ignore my page breaks. Still, 38 pages was plenty of breathing room and we had a gas.

At first I couldn't decide if I liked or resented the Conn character. Conan's son afforded new narrative opportunities, but he also seemed somewhat unnecessary. (I would later feel the same ambivalence about the Robin character when writing *Batman*.) With John Buscema handling the art, however, I found myself warming to Prince Conn. The reason, I think, is simple. John adored Hal Foster's work and the whole father-son relationship was reminiscent of how Foster handled it in *Prince Valiant*. Oddly, this injected faint pangs of nostalgia into my own brand-new story.

When John was needed elsewhere, the art for my second *King Conan* tale was more than ably handled by his longtime collaborator Ernie Chan. (Heck, I knew him back before he changed his name from Ernie Chua.) Ernie also craved more pages, meatier stories, bigger panels, and you can tell.

As a kid, I loved three real-world things to the point of obsession: Native Americans, dinosaurs and ancient

Egyptian monuments, artifacts and mummies. From the non-real realm, give me comic books and monster movies. Indeed, the one film I've surely seen more times than any other must be *King Kong*. My entire run on *King Conan* seems influenced by mash-ups of these old loves, issue #10 especially so. Indeed, it includes a direct homage to (or rip-off from) *King Kong*—but I remember priding myself on bringing an original twist to a familiar scene. Namely, the Hero in the Monster's Maw, feet planted on giant tongue, palms braced against roof of mouth to prevent jaws from chomping.

A cliché, right? But what happens when the monster's vastly superior strength prevails, when those jaws slowly but surely start to close and when the hero is ultimately trapped within a cage of huge teeth? Well, the only way out is through those teeth. Snap one off, tumble down and impale the monster's heart with its own fang. Piece of cake for a guy like Conan.

As soon as I looked up the meaning of "cenotaph" way back when, I figured a story must be lurking in there somewhere. After all, if a cenotaph was a crypt with no body, then maybe it could at least contain a ghost. Hence #11's "The Haunter of the Cenotaph." Thanks to Alan Kupperberg for filling in on the art at the last minute, as I recall.

Ditto thanks to Ron Frenz on #12, but other than Ron doing a nice job on short notice, I remember virtually nothing else about this story.

With #13, the *King Conan* title finally acquired its new regular artist—and I was jacked. In fact, Marc Silvestri was the first of two extremely talented new artists with whom I teamed at the tail end of my initial ten-year run at Marvel, the other newcomer being Kevin Nowlan on my last two issues of *Moon Knight*. Marc arrived on *King Conan* a bit earlier, so we got to do three whole issues together. I was looking forward to long working relationships with both of these guys, but it was not to be. Like Roy Thomas, I would soon be forced by circumstance to leave Marvel for DC, all complicated by a first foray into Hollywood hell.

Before that, however, Marc knocked my socks off with his first effort, clearly loaded with enormous potential. The story itself was sparked by a nagging feeling that Howardian "sword and sorcery" was too often little more than swords. "Circle of Sorcery," then, was my attempt to rectify that situation—but in hindsight it looks like I overcompensated by smacking the pendulum way too far toward the sorcery side. A better title might have been "Gauntlet of Sorcerous Travails" or maybe "One Damned Magic Thing After Another."

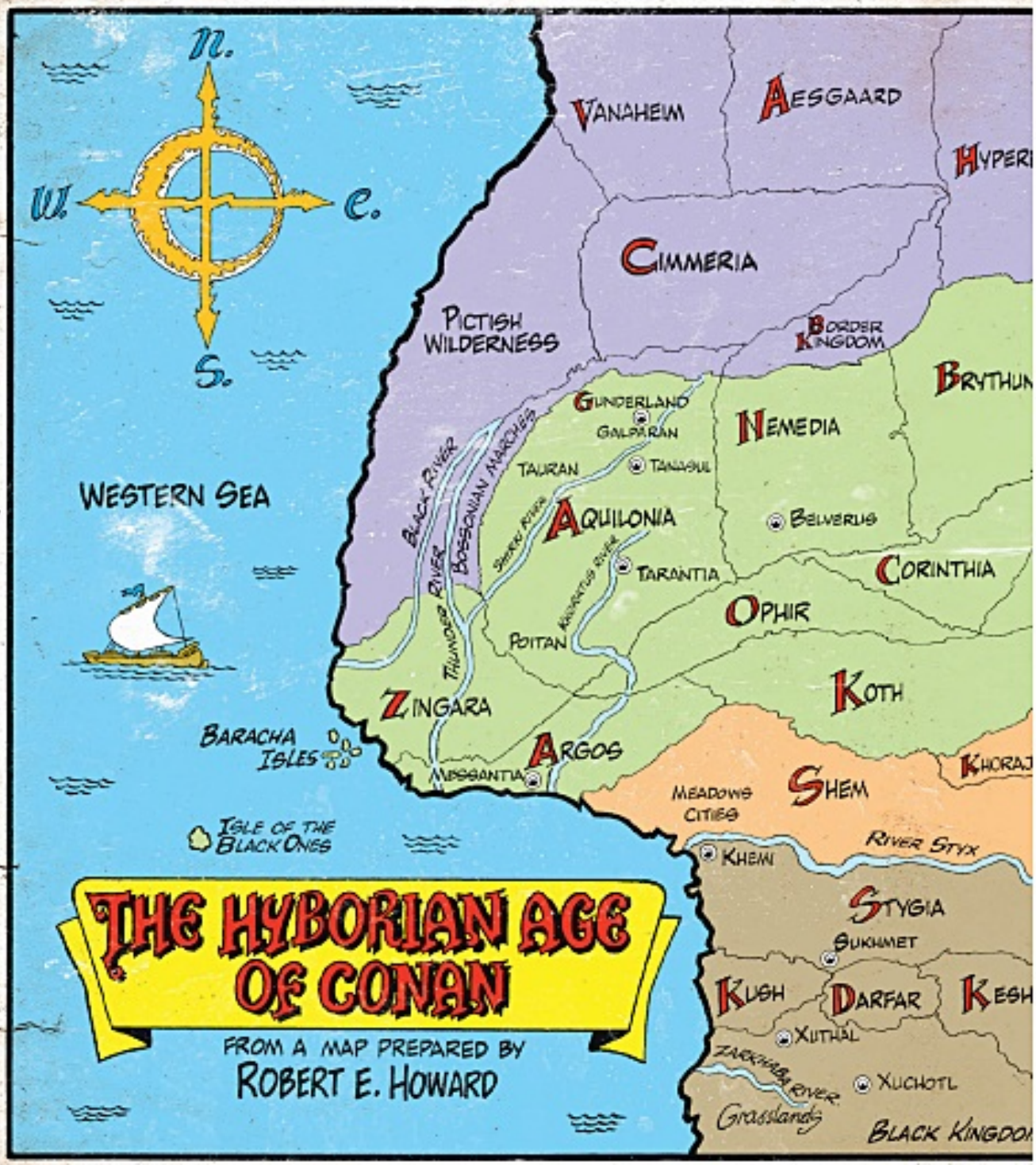
My run on the title ended with #15's "The Looters of R'Shann," a buddy-story twist on *The Prince and the Pauper*, with Conan in disguise returning to his wayward youth as a thief.

Marc stayed aboard for another couple of issues—and eventually went on to become a Very Big Cheese at a little something called Image Comics.

And among other things, I went on to the lung-busting breathing room of graphic novels, where Page Mania reigns supreme.

2021

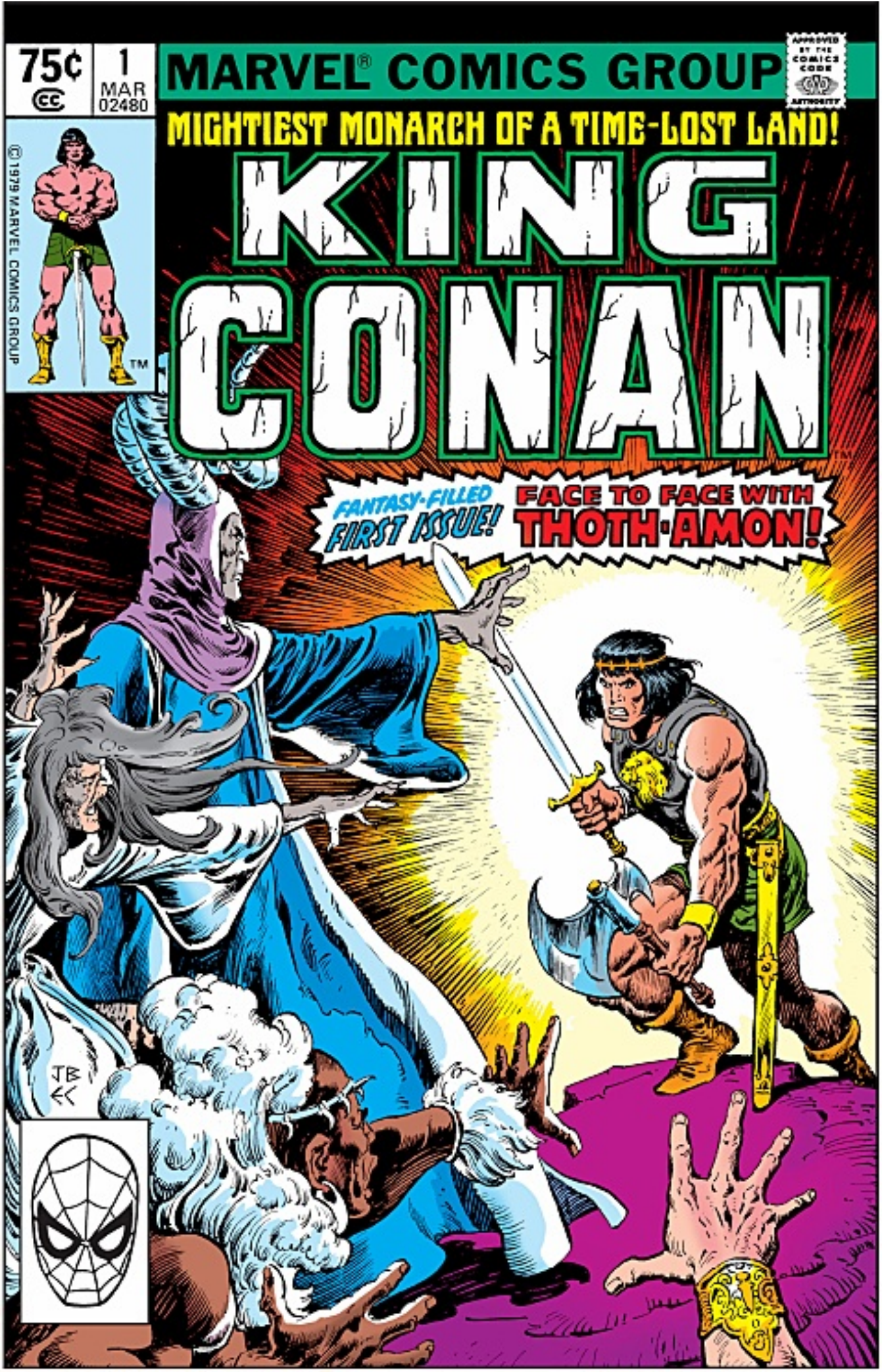
Doug Moench scripted an eclectic array of titles for Marvel in the 1970s: Morbius in Adventures Into Fear, Inhumans, Werewolf by Night *and* Godzilla. *He co-created Moon Knight and scribed the definitive Shang-Chi in* Master of Kung Fu. *At DC, he wrote numerous Batman stories in* Batman, Detective Comics *and* Legends of the Dark Knight.


N.
W.
E.
S.
VANAHEIM
AESGAARD
HYPERI
CIMMERIA
PICTISH WILDERNESS
BORDER KINGDOM
BRYTHUN
GUNDERLAND
GALPARAN
NEMEDIA
TAURAN
TANAGUL
BLACK RIVER
BOSSONIAN MARCHES
SERKI RIVER
WESTERN SEA
AQUILONIA
BELVERUS
KORATHUS RIVER
TARANTIA
CORINTHIA
OPHIR
POITAIN
THUNDER RIVER
KOTH
ZINGARA
BARACHA ISLES
ARGOS
MESSANTIA
MEADOWS CITIES
SHEM
KHORAJ
RIVER STYX
KHEMI
ISLE OF THE BLACK ONES
STYGIA
SUKHMET
KUSH
DARFAR
KESH
XUITHAL
ZARKHEBA RIVER
XUCHOTL
Grasslands
BLACK KINGDOM
THE HYBORIAN AGE OF CONAN
FROM A MAP PREPARED BY
ROBERT E. HOWARD

"Know, oh prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the Sons of Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars – Nemedia, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold.

"But the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia, reigning supreme in the dreaming west. Hither came Conan the Cimmerian, black-haired, sullen-eyed, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandaled feet."

– The Nemedian Chronicles



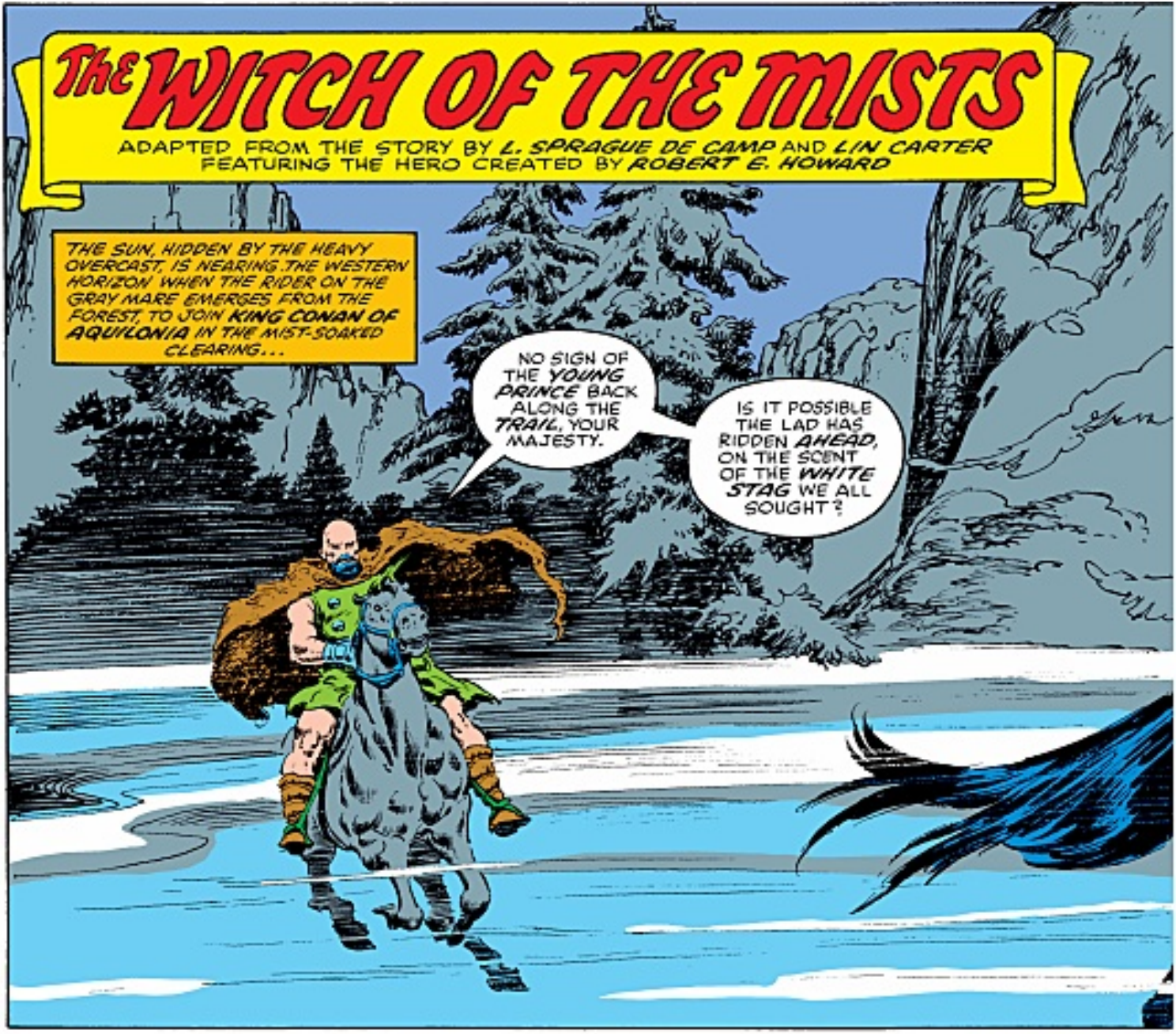
COVER PENCILER: JOHN BUSCEMA

COVER INKER: ERNIE CHAN

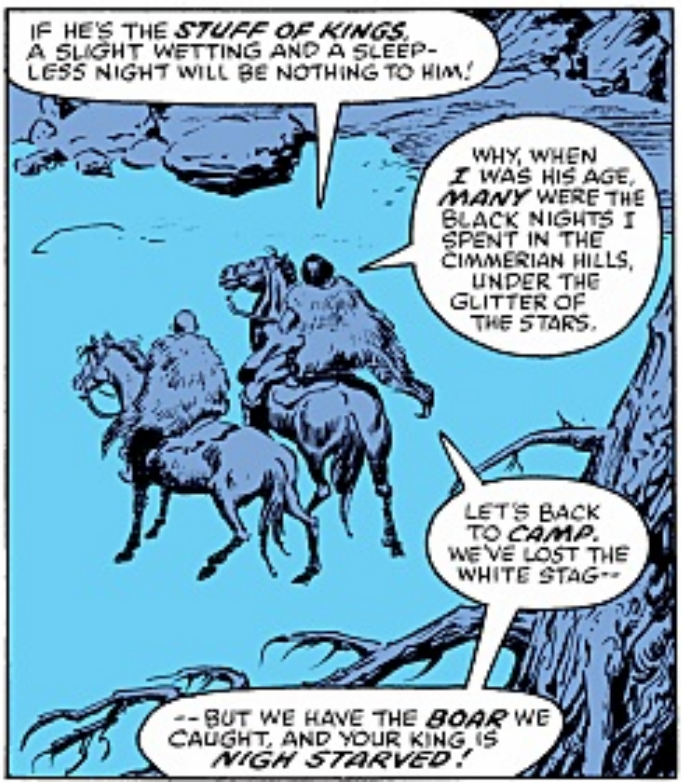
Stan Lee PRESENTS:
THE FIRST AND GREATEST SWORD-AND-SORCERY HERO!
KING CONAN
FEATURING THE EPIC ADVENTURER CREATED BY ROBERT E. HOWARD
A NEW SERIES OF SWASH-BUCKLING SORCEROUS SAGAS BY
ROY THOMAS
WRITER/EDITOR
&
JOHN BUSCEMA
ILLUSTRATOR
ERNIE CHAN, EMBELLISHER
G. ROUSSOS
COLORIST
JOE ROSEN
LETTERER
JIM SHOOTER
CONSULTING EDITOR

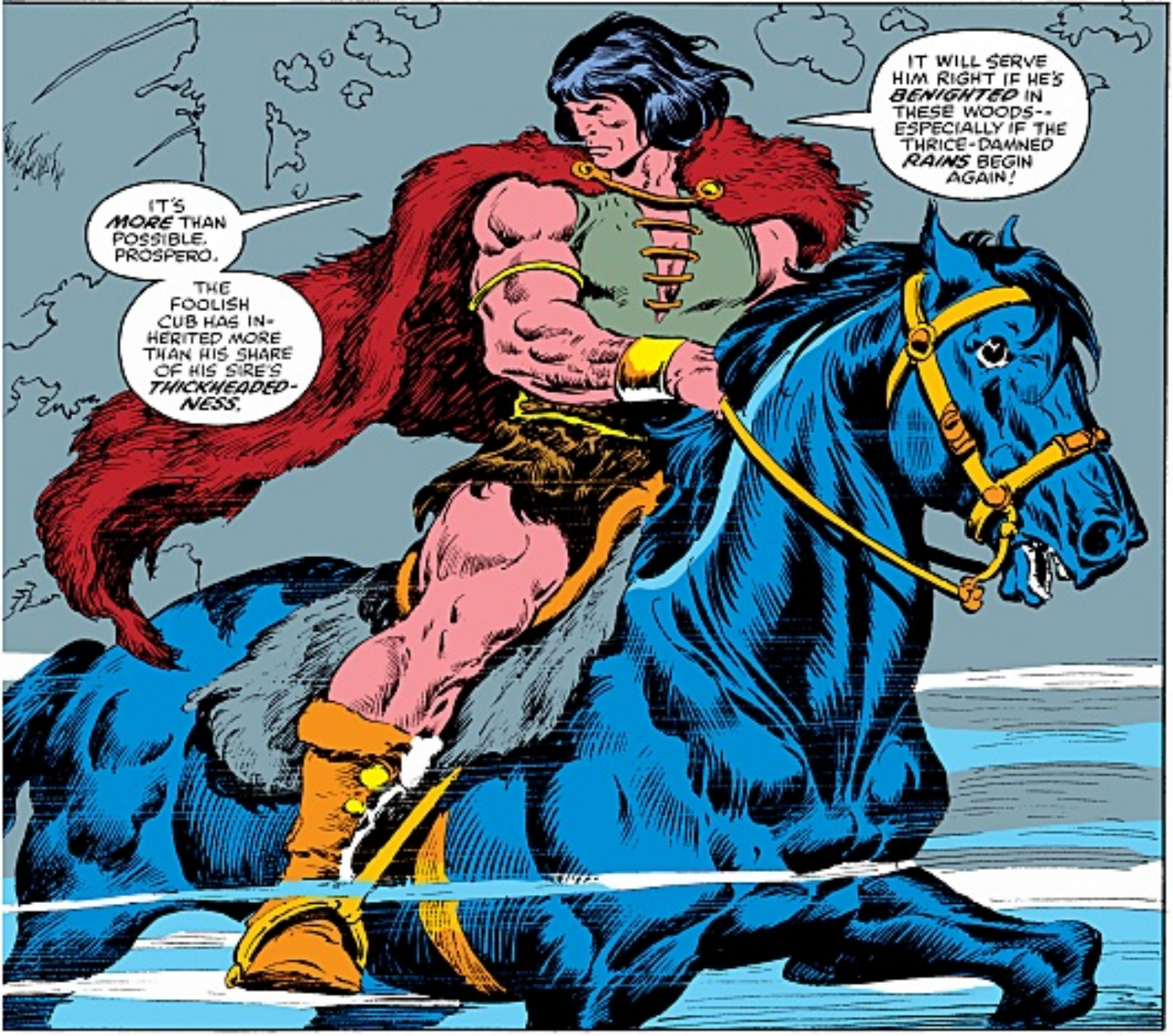
"KNOW, O PRINCE, THAT THE MAN CALLED CONAN WAS ALL THINGS IN HIS DAY, AFTER HE HAD WANDERED SOUTH FROM THE SNOW-CAPPED HILLS OF HIS NATIVE CIMMERIA:
"FIRST A THIEF, WITH MORE COURAGE THAN SKILL... THEN A SOLDIER OF FORTUNE IN MORE NATIONS AND WITH MORE ARMIES THAN MOST MEN CAN COUNT...
"... AYE, EVEN A PIRATE MORE THAN ONCE, FIRST WITH THE SHE-CORSAIR BELIT, LATER WITH BOTH THE BLOODY BARACHANS AND THE BUCCANEERS OF ZINGARA.
"THEN, IN HIS FIFTH DECADE HE SLEW A VICIOUS TYRANT AND BECAME KING IN AQUILONIA, PROUDEST KINGDOM OF THE VIOLENT HYBORIAN AGE.

"IN TIME, HE TOOK A WIFE: THE FAIR ZENOBIA, AS GENTLE OF SPEECH AS HE WAS SWIFT OF SWORD, YET POSSESSED OF AN INNER WILL OF IRON.
"THE ELDEST OF HIS CHILDREN WAS A SON, LIKEWISE NAMED CONAN... BUT MORE USUALLY KNOWN BY HIS SOBRIQUET OF CONN.
"ALL THE WESTERN WORLD DID DO THEM HOMAGE... FOR NOW, AT LAST, THE LION OF AQUILONIA HAD A CUB... AN HEIR.
"AND IT WAS WHEN YOUNG CONN HAD SEEN SOME TWELVE SUMMERS THAT THE BROODING, DARKSOME EVIL CAME WAFTING FROM BOTH NORTH AND SOUTH... TO BLOW LIKE A NOXIOUS WIND ACROSS THE FACE OF THE LAND...!"


THE WITCH OF THE MISTS
ADAPTED FROM THE STORY BY L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP AND LIN CARTER
FEATURING THE HERO CREATED BY ROBERT E. HOWARD
THE SUN, HIDDEN BY THE HEAVY OVERCAST, IS NEARING THE WESTERN HORIZON WHEN THE RIDER ON THE GRAY MARE EMERGES FROM THE FOREST, TO JOIN KING CONAN OF AQUILONIA IN THE MIST-SOAKED CLEARING...
NO SIGN OF THE YOUNG PRINCE BACK ALONG THE TRAIL, YOUR MAJESTY.
IS IT POSSIBLE THE LAD HAS RIDDEN AHEAD, ON THE SCENT OF THE WHITE STAG WE ALL SOUGHT?

SHALL I SUMMON THE REST OF THE PARTY, SIRE? 'TWERE NOT GOOD TO LET THE HEIR TO THE THRONE BE LOST IN THE FOREST OVERNIGHT, EVEN HERE IN GUNDERLAND.*
NO, LET MY SON BE!
WE COULD SPREAD OUT, SOUNDING HORNS...!
WE'LL ACCOUNT THIS PART OF THE LAD'S EDUCATION.
*GUNDERLAND: NORTHERN PROVINCE OF AQUILONIA. --ROY.


IF HE'S THE STUFF OF KINGS, A SLIGHT WETTING AND A SLEEPLESS NIGHT WILL BE NOTHING TO HIM!
WHY, WHEN I WAS HIS AGE, MANY WERE THE BLACK NIGHTS I SPENT IN THE CIMMERIAN HILLS, UNDER THE GLITTER OF THE STARS.
LET'S BACK TO CAMP. WE'VE LOST THE WHITE STAG--
--BUT WE HAVE THE BOAR WE CAUGHT, AND YOUR KING IS NIGH STARVED!


IT WILL SERVE HIM RIGHT IF HE'S BENIGHTED IN THESE WOODS-- ESPECIALLY IF THE THRICE-DAMNED RAINS BEGIN AGAIN!
IT'S MORE THAN POSSIBLE, PROSPERO.
THE FOOLISH CUB HAS INHERITED MORE THAN HIS SHARE OF HIS SIRE'S THICKHEADEDNESS.

THAT NIGHT, WINE LOOSENS THE BARBARIAN-BORN MONARCH'S TONGUE TO AN UNUSUAL DEGREE, AND BAWDY ANECDOTES FROM HIS LONG CAREER POUR FORTH...
...SO THEN, NATURALLY, I DUMPED THE FAITHLESS WENCH FROM TWO STORIES HIGH INTO A CESSPOOL.
MAY CROM AND MITRA SKEWER ME WITH LIGHTNING IF I DIDN'T!
ALL THE SAME, PROSPERO NOTICES THAT, FROM TIME TO TIME, CONAN CEASES HIS FORCIBLY LIGHTHEARTED CAROUSING...

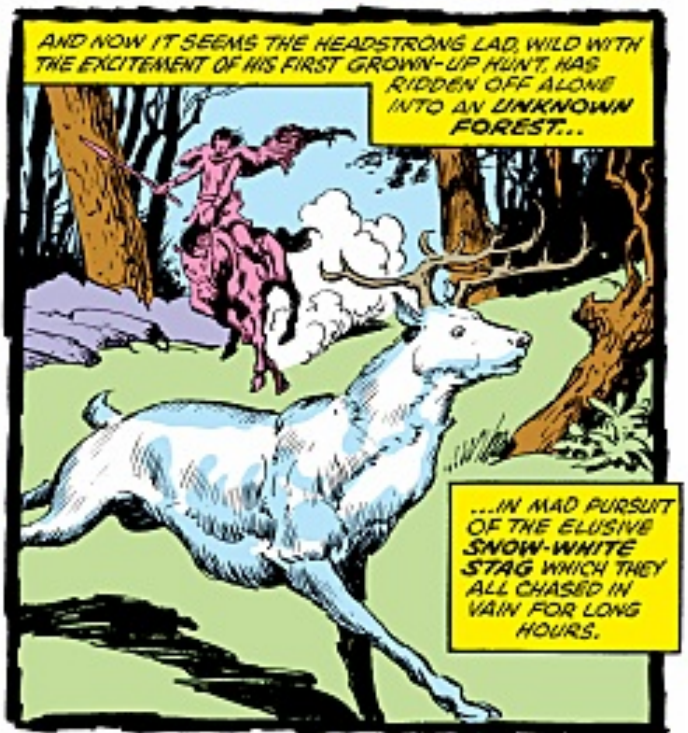
...SILENCING THE OTHERS' LAUGHTER WITH A LIFTED HAND, TO LISTEN FOR DISTANT HOOFBEATS...
...OR TO PROVE THE BLACKNESS OF THESE GLOOMY FORESTS NORTH OF TANASUL WITH HIS DEEP-SET EYES OF VOLCANIC BLUE.

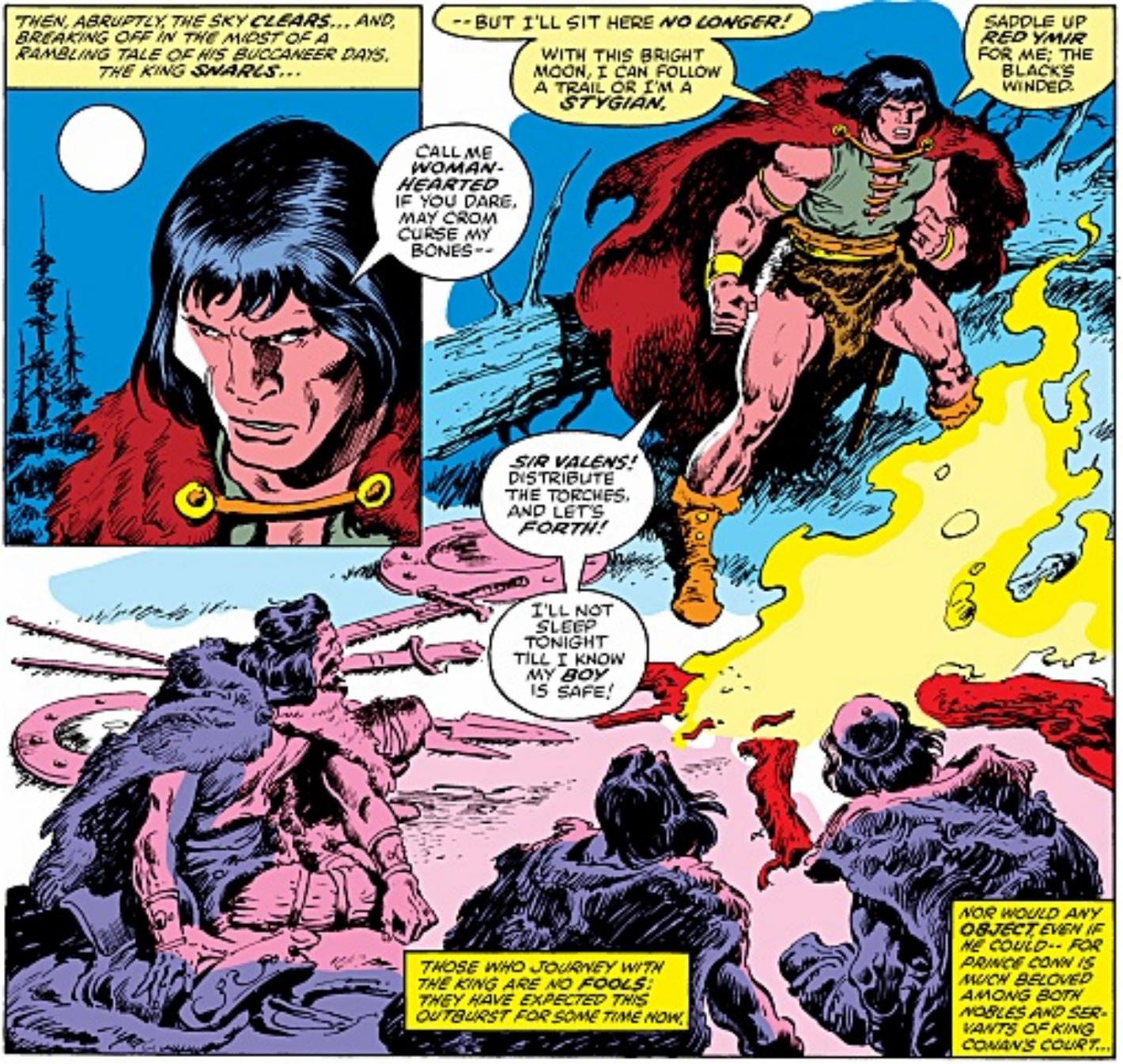
PROSPERO KNOWS THAT, WHATEVER HIS EARLIER WORDS, CONAN IS FAR MORE WORRIED OVER PRINCE CONN'S FAILURE TO RETURN THAN HE WISHES KNOWN.
DOUBTLESS HE FEELS PANGS OF GUILT, SINCE THE HUNTING TRIP TO NORTHERN GUNDERLAND WAS HIS OWN IDEA.

HIS QUEEN, ZENOBIA, FELL SERIOUSLY ILL AFTER GIVING BIRTH TO THEIR THIRD CHILD, A DAUGHTER.
DURING THE SLOW MONTHS OF HER RECOVERY, CONAN HAS BEEN WITH HER AS MUCH OF THE TIME AS HE CAN AFFORD TO TAKE FROM HIS ROYAL DUTIES.

FEELING NEGLECTED, AS BOYS OF TWELVE ARE WONT TO DO, YOUNG CONN BECAME SURLY AND WITHDRAWN...

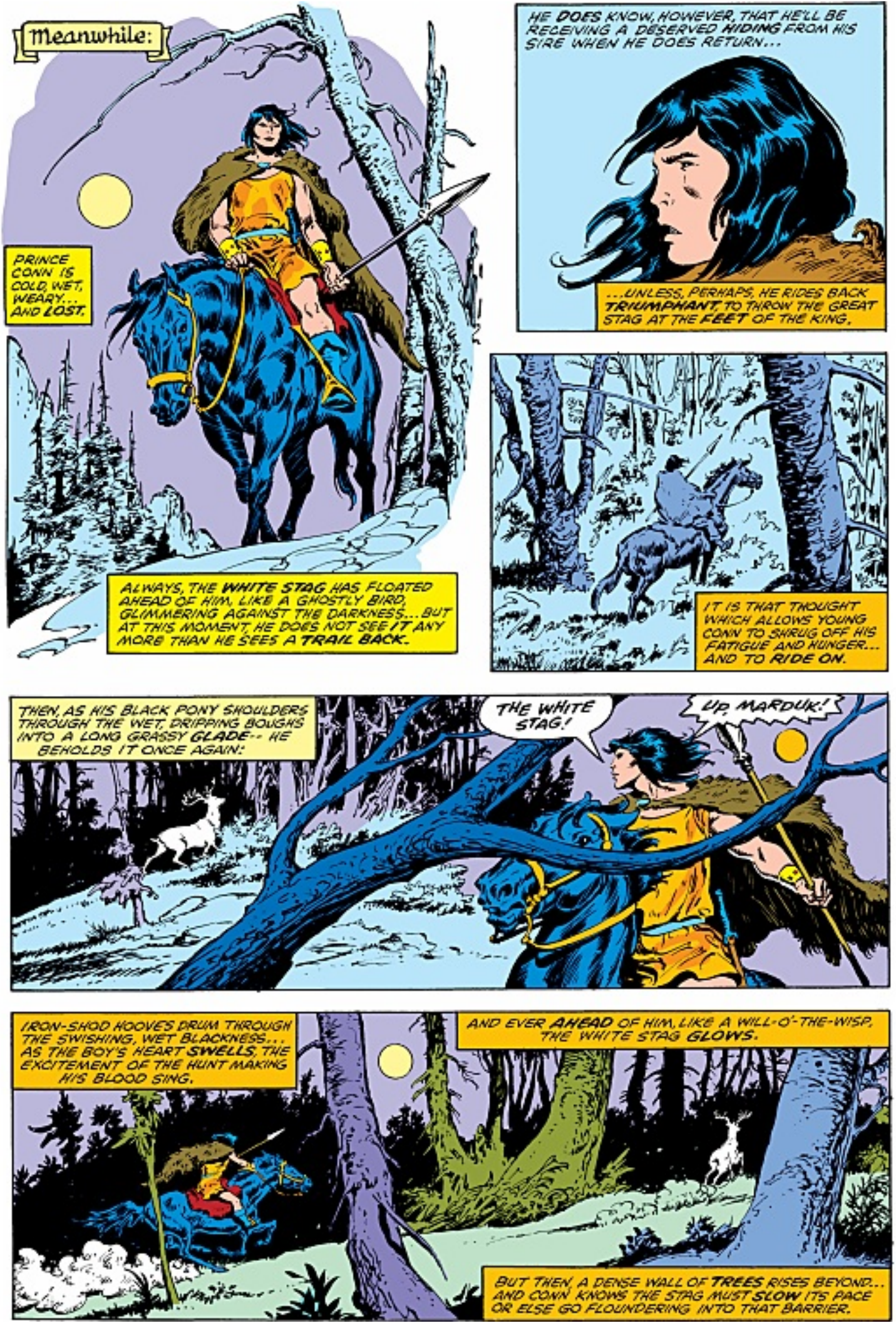
THUS, NOW THAT ZENOBIA HAS REGAINED MUCH OF HER STRENGTH, AND DEATH'S DARK WINGS SEEM FAR FROM THE PALACE ONCE MORE...
...THE KING SUGGESTED A FEW WEEKS OF CAMPING AND HUNTING, HOPING TO FIND A NEW CLOSENESS TO HIS SON AND HEIR-APPARENT.


AND NOW IT SEEMS THE HEADSTRONG LAD, WILD WITH THE EXCITEMENT OF HIS FIRST GROWN-UP HUNT, HAS RIDDEN OFF ALONE INTO AN UNKNOWN FOREST...
...IN MAD PURSUIT OF THE ELUSIVE SNOW-WHITE STAG WHICH THEY ALL CHASED IN VAIN FOR LONG HOURS.


THEN, ABRUPTLY, THE SKY CLEARS... AND, BREAKING OFF IN THE MIDST OF A RAMBLING TALE OF HIS BUCCANEER DAYS, THE KING SNARLS...
CALL ME WOMAN-HEARTED IF YOU DARE, MAY CROM CURSE MY BONES--
--BUT I'LL SIT HERE NO LONGER!
WITH THIS BRIGHT MOON, I CAN FOLLOW A TRAIL OR I'M A STYGIAN.
SADDLE UP RED YMIR FOR ME; THE BLACK'S WINDED.
SIR VALENS! DISTRIBUTE THE TORCHES, AND LET'S FORTH!
I'LL NOT SLEEP TONIGHT TILL I KNOW MY BOY IS SAFE!
THOSE WHO JOURNEY WITH THE KING ARE NO FOOLS: THEY HAVE EXPECTED THIS OUTBURST FOR SOME TIME NOW.
NOR WOULD ANY OBJECT, EVEN IF HE COULD-- FOR PRINCE CONN IS MUCH BELOVED AMONG BOTH NOBLES AND SERVANTS OF KING CONAN'S COURT...

BUT, ALL KNOW THAT THERE BE OTHER MEN-- ROGUES, THIEVES, AND RENEGADES, WHO OFTEN TAKE TO THE WILDS -- AYE, NOT TO MENTION GREAT BEARS AND GRAY WOLVES HERE IN GUNDERLAND.
WHEN I FIND THAT UNLICKED CUB, I'LL BEAT HIS PANTS FOR PULLING US FROM A WARM FIRE!

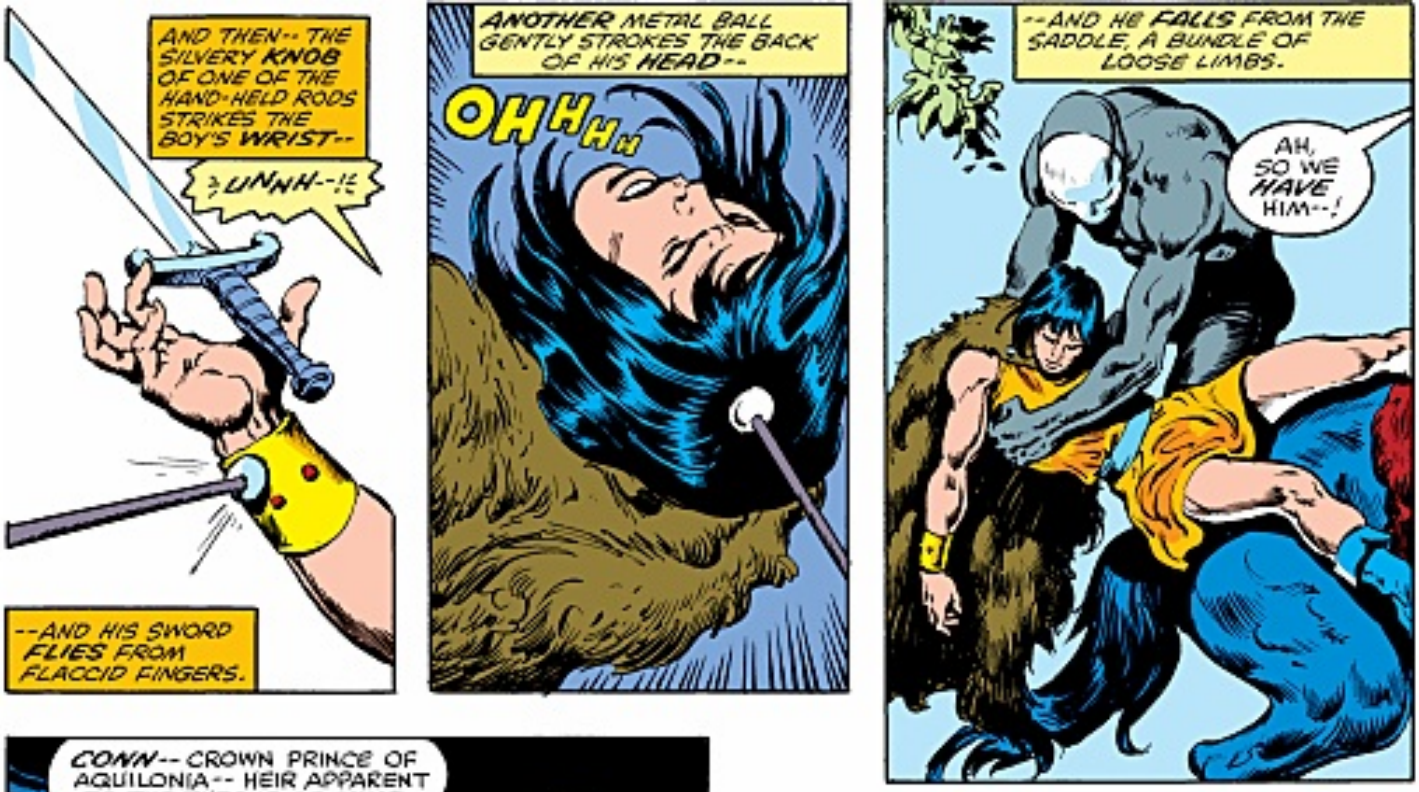
JUST THEN, A SNOW-WHITE OWL-- AN OMEN OF SORTS-- FLOATS ACROSS THE MOON'S FULL FACE.
HOO HOO HOO
WHAT THE DEVIL--?
AND, EVEN AS HE RIDES, CONAN RECALLS HIS OWN PEOPLE'S WHISPERED TALES OF A WHITE WERE-STAG, SWIFT AS THE WINTER WIND.
PRAY CROM IT'S NOT SUCH A DEMON-THING HIS FIRSTBORN SON HAS PURSUED INTO THE NIGHT-SHROUDED FOREST.


Meanwhile:
PRINCE CONN IS COLD, WET, WEARY... AND LOST.
ALWAYS, THE WHITE STAG HAS FLOATED AHEAD OF HIM, LIKE A GHOSTLY BIRD, GLIMMERING AGAINST THE DARKNESS... BUT AT THIS MOMENT, HE DOES NOT SEE IT ANY MORE THAN HE SEES A TRAIL BACK.
HE DOES KNOW, HOWEVER, THAT HE'LL BE RECEIVING A DESERVED HIDING FROM HIS SIRE WHEN HE DOES RETURN...
...UNLESS, PERHAPS, HE RIDES BACK TRIUMPHANT, TO THROW THE GREAT STAG AT THE FEET OF THE KING.
IT IS THAT THOUGHT WHICH ALLOWS YOUNG CONN TO SHRUG OFF HIS FATIGUE AND HUNGER... AND TO RIDE ON.
THEN, AS HIS BLACK PONY SHOULDERS THROUGH THE WET, DRIPPING BOUGHS INTO A LONG GRASSY GLADE-- HE BEHOLDS IT ONCE AGAIN:
THE WHITE STAG!
UP, MARDUK!
IRON-SHOD HOOVES DRUM THROUGH THE SWISHING, WET BLACKNESS... AS THE BOY'S HEART SWELLS, THE EXCITEMENT OF THE HUNT MAKING HIS BLOOD SING.
AND EVER AHEAD OF HIM, LIKE A WILL-O'-THE-WISP, THE WHITE STAG GLOWS.
BUT THEN, A DENSE WALL OF TREES RISES BEYOND... AND CONN KNOWS THE STAG MUST SLOW ITS PACE OR ELSE GO FLOUNDERING INTO THAT BARRIER.

A FEW MOMENTS MORE, AND THE LITHE PRINCE FLINGS BACK ONE ARM TO HURL HIS JAVELIN...
HAH! THERE'S NOWHERE FOR YOU TO GO, IS THERE, GHOST-STAG?
I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE THE LOOK ON MY FATHER'S FACE WHEN I--
CROM AND MITRA!
EVEN THE LADY'S STRICT SIRE AND WATCHFUL MOTHER WOULD DOUBTLESS FORGIVE HIM FOR THE OATH THAT NOW ESCAPES HIS LIPS--
--AS, NOT THIRTY FEET DISTANT FROM HIM, THE STAG SUDDENLY DISSOLVES INTO MIST--
--A MIST THAT INSTANTLY REFORMS ITSELF--
--INTO A TALL, GAUNT HUMAN SHAPE--
--A WOMAN, CLOTHED IN ROBES AS THE STAG'S HIDE HAD BEEN--
--A WOMAN WITH A BILLOWING CLOUD OF IRON-GREY HAIR--

--HAIR THAT SWIRLS ABOUT A BONY, ALMOST EXPRESSIONLESS FACE, WITH ITS COLD, CAT-GREEN EYES!
YIELD, BOY!
IN THE STILLNESS, CONN IS AWARE OF HIS TREMBLING HANDS. IS THIS FEAR?
WHO IS THIS GHOST-WOMAN, TO TEACH FEAR TO THE SON OF CONAN THE CONQUEROR?
YIELD!? NEVER!
JUST THEN, AT A GESTURE FROM THE WOMAN-THING, LEAVES CRACKLE BEHIND HIM-- TWIGS SNAP LOUDLY IN THE NIGHT SILENCE--
AND JERKING HIS HEAD AROUND, THE BOY SEES THE TALL, LEAN MEN-- GAUNT AS MUMMIES AND AT LEAST SEVEN FEET TALL-- STEP INTO THE CLEARING FROM ALL SIDES
WHO--?
FROM HEAD TO HEEL THEY ARE CLAD IN BLACK GARMENTS THAT FIT TIGHTLY AS GLOVES-- AND THEY HOLD STRANGE RODS OF DARK WOOD WITH SILVERY KNOBS.
BUT, IT IS THEIR FACES THAT STRIKE INTO CONN'S HEART THE THRILL OF SUPERSTITIOUS AWE...
FOR, THEY HAVE NO FACES!
BENEATH THE TIGHT-FITTING BLACK COWLS, THEIR VISAGES ARE SMOOTH, BLANK, WHITE OVALS!
AGAIN THE EERIE WOMAN SPEAKS:
YIELD!
NO! MY ANCESTORS FACED THE GIANT BEAR-- THE DREAD SNOW-DRAGON-- EVEN THE SABRE-TOOTH!
SHALL I BOW THE KNEE TO AN OLD WOMAN AND MEN WITHOUT FACES?

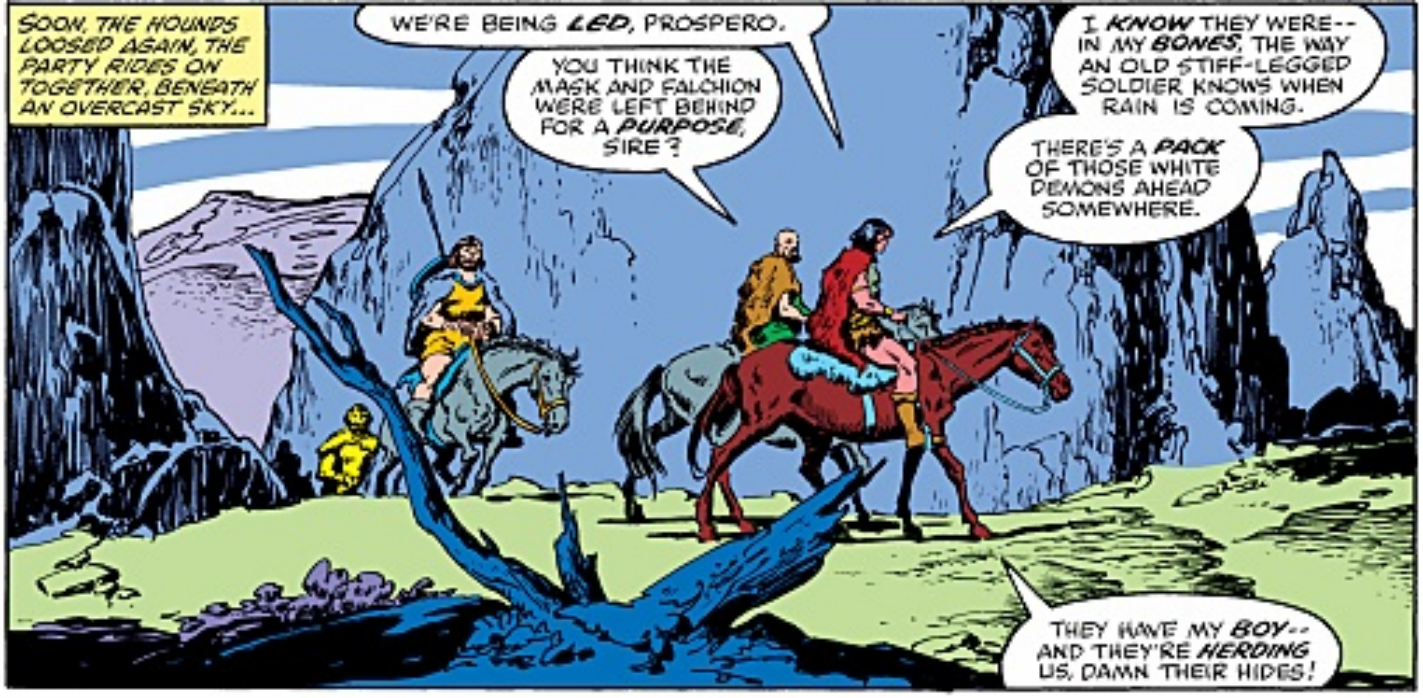
THEN, YELLING THE CIMMERIAN WAR-CRY LEARNED FROM HIS MIGHTY SIRE, THE YOUTH CHARGES THE SINISTER, SURROUNDING FIGURES--
YEEEE-AHH!
--RAISING HIS JAVELIN, TO HURL IT AT THE NEAREST OF THE FACELESS ONES!
YET, BEFORE HIS PONY CAN MAKE MORE THAN ONE WEARY BOUND--
OWW
--AGONIZING PAIN SHOOTS UP HIS ARM, AND HIS WEAPON DROPS FROM NUMB FINGERS!
STILL, WITH AN INARTICULATE CRY, CONN CATCHES WITH HIS REMAINING HAND AT THE SWORD THAT CLINGS TO HIS HIP--
--EVEN AS, WITH MAGICAL SWIFTNESS, ONE OF THE BLACK-CLAD MEN GRASPS HIS MOUNT'S BRIDLE WITH A BONY HAND!
YOU THINK IT'S THAT EASY, DO YOU?
WELL, WE SHALL SEE!
WITH A GURGLING GROAN, THE TALL MAN FOLDS AT THE KNEES AND FALLS FACE-DOWN IN THE WET GRASS...
REAR, MARDUK! REAR!
BUT, LIKE PHANTOMS, HIS ATTACKERS EVADE THOSE IRON-SHOD HOOVES...


AND THEN-- THE SILVERY KNOB OF ONE OF THE HAND-HELD RODS STRIKES THE BOY'S WRIST--
UNNH--!
--AND HIS SWORD FLIES FROM FLACCID FINGERS.
ANOTHER METAL BALL GENTLY STROKES THE BACK OF HIS HEAD--
OHHHH
--AND HE FALLS FROM THE SADDLE, A BUNDLE OF LOOSE LIMBS.
AH, SO WE HAVE HIM--!

CONN-- CROWN PRINCE OF AQUILONIA-- HEIR APPARENT TO THE THRONE OF KING CONAN!
THOTH-AMON WILL BE PLEASED!

Come Morning:
HO, SIRE!
IT'S EURIC-- MY CHIEF HUNTSMAN!
AYE, MAJESTY-- WE SENT HIM ON AHEAD.

WHAT HAVE YOU FOUND, EURIC?
THIS, SIRE...!
AN IVORY MASK-- FEATURELESS, EXCEPT FOR THE EYE SLITS.
HYPERBOREAN WORK, CURSE THAT LAND OF DEVILS!
ANYTHING... ELSE?
BLOOD ON THE GRASS-- THE GRASS ITSELF TRAMPLED-- HOOFMARKS OF A YOUNG PONY--
--AND-- THIS, I FEAR--!
THE FALCHION I GAVE CONN-- ON HIS LAST BIRTHDAY!
WHEN THEY'VE FOUND THE TRACK, SOUND YOUR HORN AND GATHER THE MEN!
AND WAS THERE-- NOTHING MORE?
THE DOGS ARE SNIFFING ABOUT FOR A TRAIL NOW, SIRE.
ONCE AGAIN, THE KING OF AQUILONIA SHIVERS... AS IF AN UNSEEN DRAFT OF ICY AIR WERE BLOWING UPON HIS HEART.
THE SUN IS AN HOUR OLDER WHEN THEY FIND THE CORPSE, BURIED BENEATH A MOUND OF DEAD LEAVES...
SOMETIME LAST NIGHT, SIRE.
HE'S BEEN STRIPPED OF ANY CLOTHES HE MIGHT HAVE WORN-- BUT MITRA! HE WAS NIGH SEVEN FEET TALL!
--AND NOW, THOSE DEAD, CAT-GREEN EYES!
NO OTHER MEN ON EARTH HAVE SUCH A BUILD ALONG WITH THAT PALE SKIN-- THE SILKY, COLORLESS HAIR--
HE WAS A HYPERBOREAN, ALL RIGHT...


SOON, THE HOUNDS LOOSED AGAIN, THE PARTY RIDES ON TOGETHER, BENEATH AN OVERCAST SKY...
WE'RE BEING LED, PROSPERO.
YOU THINK THE MASK AND FALCHION WERE LEFT BEHIND FOR A PURPOSE, SIRE?
I KNOW THEY WERE-- IN MY BONES, THE WAY AN OLD STIFF-LEGGED SOLDIER KNOWS WHEN RAIN IS COMING.
THERE'S A PACK OF THOSE WHITE DEMONS AHEAD SOMEWHERE.
THEY HAVE MY BOY-- AND THEY'RE HERDING US, DAMN THEIR HIDES!

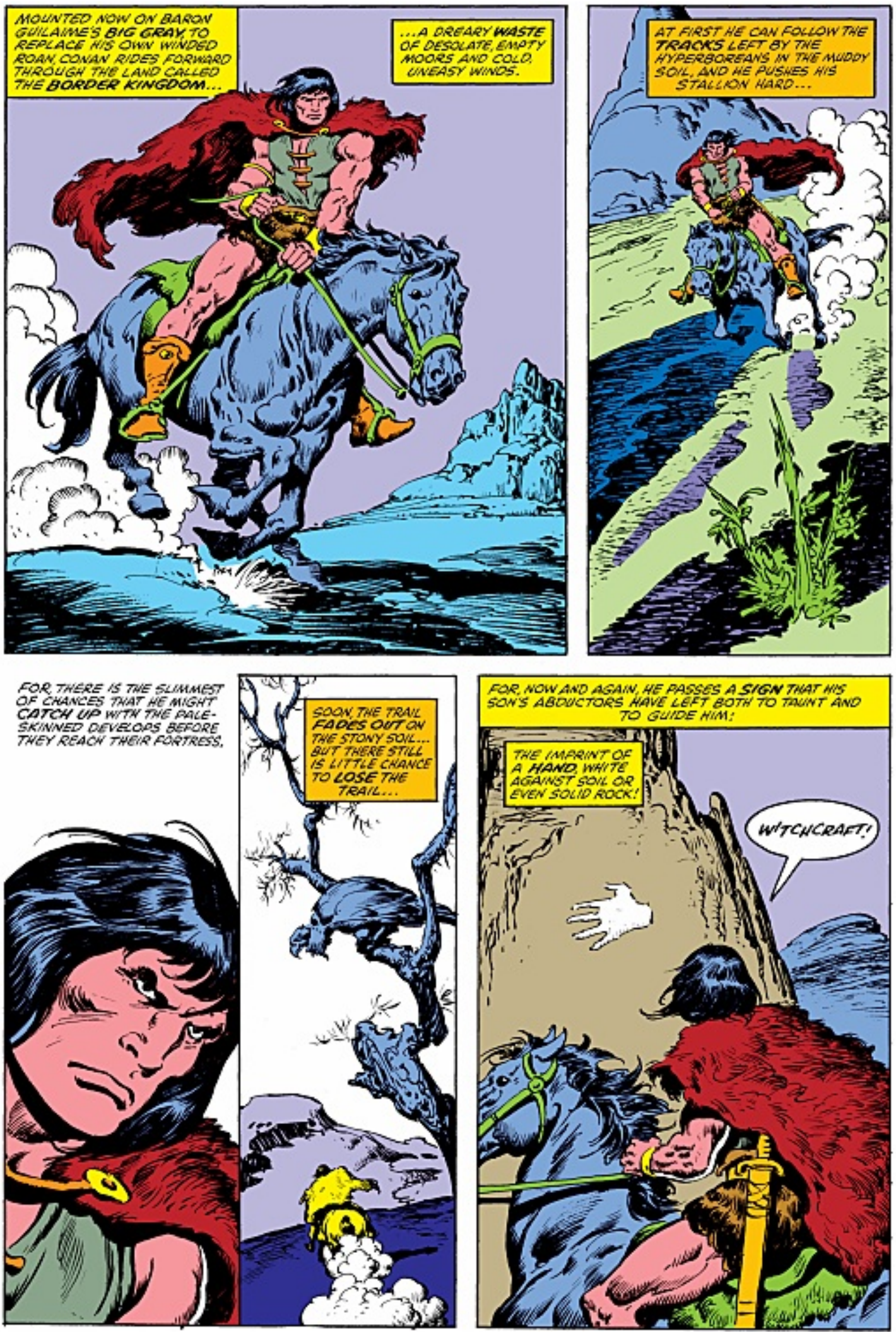
INTO AN AMBUSH, PERHAPS?
I DOUBT IT. WE'VE RIDDEN SAFELY THROUGH THREE PERFECT SITES FOR SUCH A TRAP IN THE LAST HOUR.
NO. THEY'VE SOME OTHER PURPOSE IN MIND.
MAYBE THEY'RE HOLDING THE YOUNG PRINCE FOR RANSOM!?
OR FOR BAIT!

I WAS A CAPTIVE IN HYPERBOREA ONCE-- AND WHAT I SUFFERED AT THEIR HANDS GAVE ME NO CAUSE TO LOVE THOSE BONY VULTURES--
NOR HAS WHAT I DID THERE, ERE I TOOK MY LEAVE OF THEIR HOSPITALITY, GIVEN THEM REASON TO LOVE ME!
WHAT MEANS THE IVORY MASK?
IT'S A SHADOWY LAND OF DEVILS-- CLOAKED EVER IN CLAMMY MISTS, AND RULED BY NAKED, GRINNING FEAR...

A WEIRD CULT OF BLACK-CLAD WIZARD-ASSASSINS HOLD POWER THROUGH THE TERROR OF THEIR UNCANNY ARTS.
AN OLD WOMAN IS THEIR PRIESTESS-QUEEN; THEY THINK HER THE INCARNATION OF THEIR DEATH-GODDESS.
THOSE WHO SERVE HER ENDURE STRANGE CEREMONIES--AND THE MASKS ARE AN EXAMPLE OF THEIR FANATICISM.
WHAT'S WORSE, THEIR BLIND FAITH IN THEIR DEVIL-GODS MAKE THEM IMMUNE TO FEAR AND PAIN!

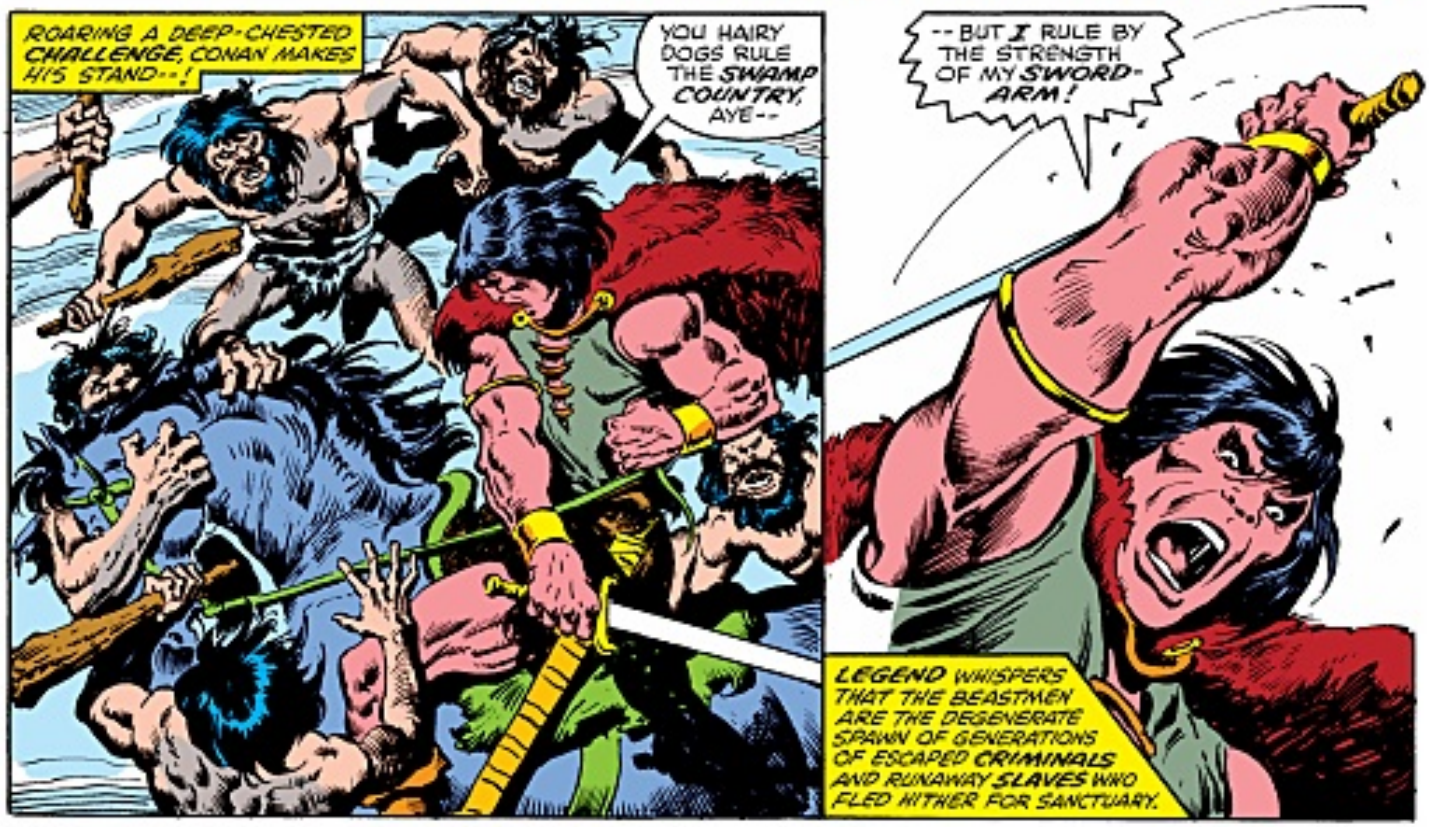
THEY RIDE FORWARD WITHOUT FURTHER WORDS.
THEN, TOWARDS EARLY AFTERNOON, NEAR THE PLACE WHERE MEET THE FRONTIERS OF AQUILONIA, CIMMERIA, NEMEDIA, AND THE BORDER KINGDOM...
HOLD! LOOK YOU THERE!
THAT'S CONN'S JAVELIN, OR I'M A PICT!

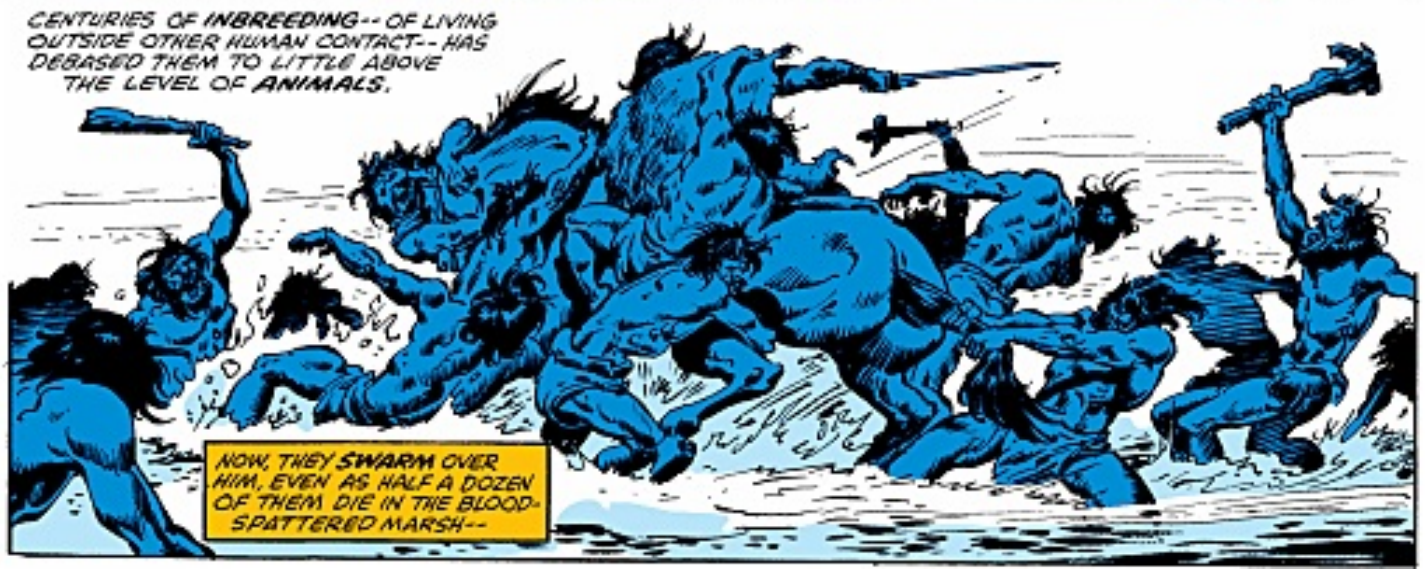
AYE, SIRE-- BUT THERE'S A ROLL OF WHITE PARCHMENT TIED TO IT--!
AS I'D EXPECTED! BRING IT HERE, EURIC!
THE MESSAGE IS CRUDELY SCRAWLED IN AQUILONIAN...
THE KING SHALL GO FORWARD ALONE TO POHIOLA. IF HE DOES THIS, THE SON OF HIS LOINS WILL NOT BE HARMED. IF HE DOES OTHER THAN THIS, THE CHILD WILL DIE IN WAYS IT IS NOT WHOLESOME TO DESCRIBE. THE KING SHALL FOLLOW THE PATH MARKED WITH THE WHITE HAND.
...AND IT IS WRITTEN... IN BLOOD.
CONAN SITS HIS HORSE, BROODING DARKLY BENEATH THE GLOOMY SKY, AS PROSPERO READS THE PARCHMENT TO THE MEN.
"...MARKED WITH THE WHITE HAND."
BUT SURELY, SIRE, YOU'LL NOT GO!
WITHOUT US WITH YOU, YOU'LL STAND NO CHANCE AGAINST--
I RIDE TO FIND MY SON, HUNTSMAN.
PROSPERO, HERE IS MY GOLDEN SEAL-RING; IT WILL MAKE YOU REGENT OF MY KINGDOM UNTIL I RETURN... OR UNTIL MY INFANT SECOND SON GROWS UP, IF I DON'T COME BACK.
I SUPPOSE THERE'S NO USE TRYING TO--
THERE ISN'T.
THEN GO WITH MITRA, CONAN OF AQUILONIA--
--BUT, BY THE GODS, I'LL GATHER AN ARMY AT TANASUL AND RIDE AFTER YOU, TO INVADE HYPERBOREA ON YOUR HEELS-- AND MAKE FOR THE CITADEL OF POHIOLA!
DO WHAT YOU WILL!
BY THEN, I'LL EITHER HAVE FREED CONN-- OR ELSE JOINED HIM IN DEATH!

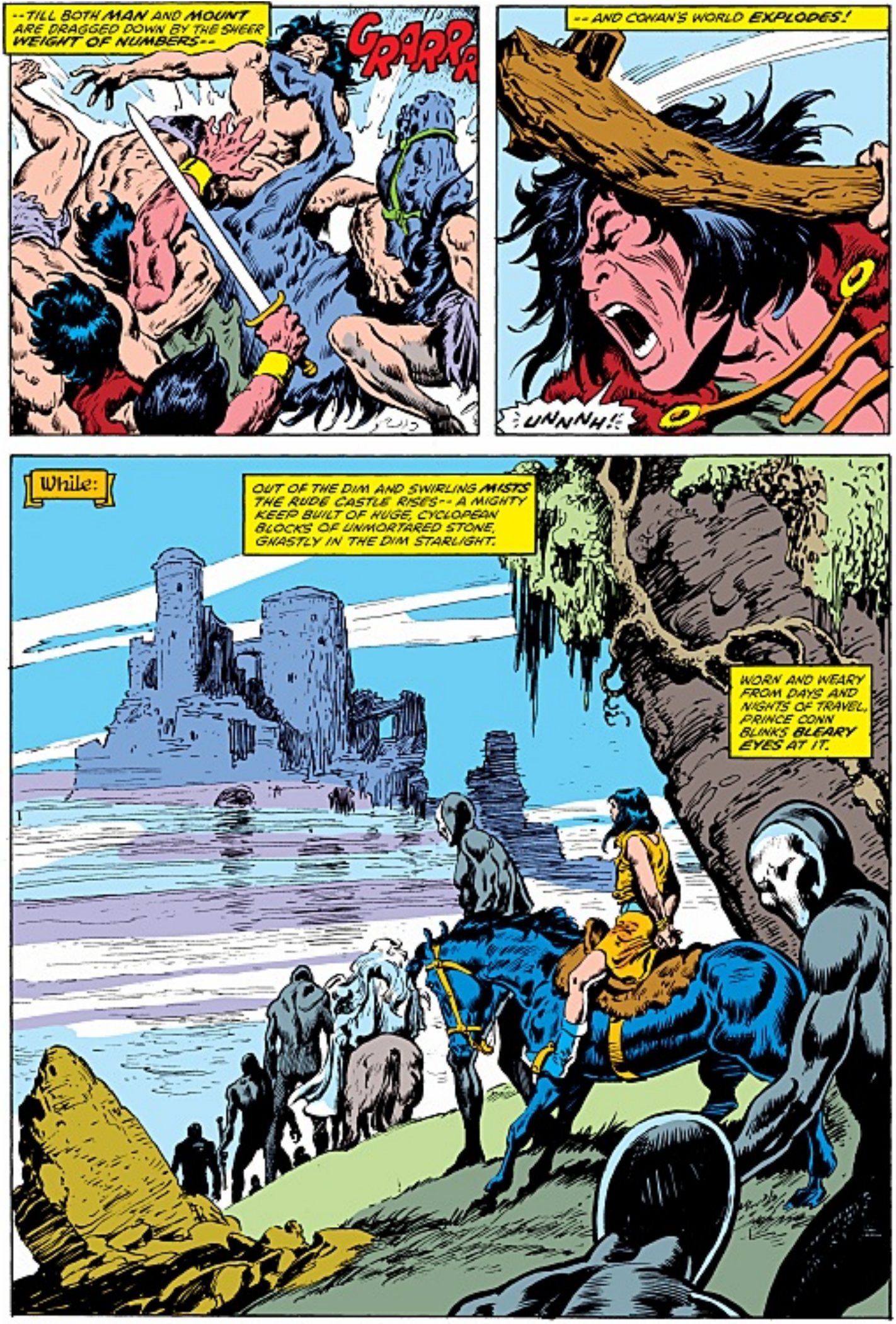

MOUNTED NOW ON BARON GUILAIME'S BIG GRAY TO REPLACE HIS OWN WINDED ROAN, CONAN RIDES FORWARD THROUGH THE LAND CALLED THE BORDER KINGDOM...
...A DREARY WASTE OF DESOLATE, EMPTY MOORS AND COLD, UNEASY WINDS.
AT FIRST HE CAN FOLLOW THE TRACKS LEFT BY THE HYPERBOREANS IN THE MUDDY SOIL, AND HE PUSHES HIS STALLION HARD...
FOR, THERE IS THE SLIMMEST OF CHANCES THAT HE MIGHT CATCH UP WITH THE PALE-SKINNED DEVILS BEFORE THEY REACH THEIR FORTRESS.
SOON, THE TRAIL FADES OUT ON THE STONY SOIL... BUT THERE STILL IS LITTLE CHANCE TO LOSE THE TRAIL...
FOR, NOW AND AGAIN, HE PASSES A SIGN THAT HIS SON'S ABDUCTORS HAVE LEFT BOTH TO TAUNT AND TO GUIDE HIM:
THE IMPRINT OF A HAND, WHITE AGAINST SOIL OR EVEN SOLID ROCK!
WITCHCRAFT!

HOUR AFTER HOUR HE RIDES STEADILY ON, STRIVING NOT TO REMEMBER THAT HIS OFFSPRING IS CAPTIVE OF THE WITCHMEN... AS THE WORLD DARKENS TOWARD NIGHT.
ONE BY ONE THE FEW STARS COME OUT, THOUGH A HAZE OVERHANGS MOST OF THE SKY.
TOWARD DAWN, HE CAN RIDE NO MORE... BUT BUILDS A SMALL FIRE WITH DRY BRACKEN, AND FALLS INTO A HEAVY SLEEP.
FOR THREE DAYS HE RIDES EVER DEEPER INTO THIS DESOLATE WASTELAND, SKIRTING THE SWAMP BORDERS OF THE GREAT SALT MARSH.
ON THE THIRD DAY, TWILIGHT COMES, PLUNGING THE TREACHEROUS BOGLAND IN GLOOM...
...WHEN, AT A FORKING OF THE PATH:
SO! THEY DON'T WANT TO TAKE A CHANCE I'D LOSE MY WAY, EH?
THEY DON'T EVEN MIND THAT I KNOW I'M GALLOPING STRAIGHT INTO A TRAP.
THE MOON'S COLD FACE IS MASKED BEHIND A LACY VEIL OF VAPOR, AS HE DRIVES HIS STALLION ALONG THE PATHWAY MARKED BY THE WHITE HAND.
THEN, SUDDENLY, AMID THE THICKENING DARKNESS--

--THE MUDDY HEATHER IS ALIVE WITH MEN!
BY THE BONES OF CROM!
THESE ARE BEASTMEN-- FILTHY, GAUNT, NAKED SAVE FOR TWISTS OF GREASY RAG ABOUT THEIR LOINS-- SNARLING AS THEY ADVANCE UPON HIM!


ROARING A DEEP-CHESTED CHALLENGE, CONAN MAKES HIS STAND--!
YOU HAIRY DOGS RULE THE SWAMP COUNTRY, AYE--
--BUT I RULE BY THE STRENGTH OF MY SWORD-ARM!
LEGEND WHISPERS THAT THE BEASTMEN ARE THE DEGENERATE SPAWN OF GENERATIONS OF ESCAPED CRIMINALS AND RUNAWAY SLAVES WHO FLED HITHER FOR SANCTUARY.


CENTURIES OF INBREEDING-- OF LIVING OUTSIDE OTHER HUMAN CONTACT-- HAS DEBASED THEM TO LITTLE ABOVE THE LEVEL OF ANIMALS.
NOW, THEY SWARM OVER HIM, EVEN AS HALF A DOZEN OF THEM DIE IN THE BLOOD-SPATTERED MARSH--


--TILL BOTH MAN AND MOUNT ARE DRAGGED DOWN BY THE SHEER WEIGHT OF NUMBERS--
GRARRR
-- AND CONAN'S WORLD EXPLODES!
UNNNH!!
While:
OUT OF THE DIM AND SWIRLING MISTS THE RUDE CASTLE RISES-- A MIGHTY KEEP BUILT OF HUGE, CYCLOPEAN BLOCKS OF UNMORTARED STONE, GHASTLY IN THE DIM STARLIGHT.
WORN AND WEARY FROM DAYS AND NIGHTS OF TRAVEL, PRINCE CONN BLINKS BLEARY EYES AT IT.

AS THEY DRAW CLOSER AND HE SEES ITS GREAT PORTCULLIS LIFTING, THE HALF-STARVED BOY REPRESSES A **SHUDDER**... FOR THE RISE OF THE SPIKED GRILL OF RUSTY IRON IS LIKE THE SLOW YAWN OF A GIGANTIC **MONSTER**.

BUT HE IS **CONN, SON OF CONAN**... SO HE SAYS NOTHING.

THROUGH THE VAST **PORTAL** THEY RIDE AND STALK, INTO AN ENORMOUS HALL WEIRDLY LIT WITH THE FLICKERING LIGHTS OF TORCHES.

THE PORTCULLIS COMES DOWN BEHIND THEM, TO RING AGAINST THE STONE PAVE LIKE THE **KNELL OF DOOM**.

COLD WHITE HANDS PLUCK THE BOY FROM THE SADDLE, TO TOSS HIM INTO A CORNER, AMID FILTH-STREWN STRAW.

OBSERVANT EVEN NOW, AMID THE GLOOM, HE SEES THAT THE WHOLE CASTLE IS **ONE TREMENDOUS HALL**, WITH ITS ROOF-RAFTERS LOST IN **DARKNESS** HIGH ABOVE.

THEN, AT A MUTTERED COMMAND FROM THE OLD WOMAN...

YOU'RE-- CUTTING MY **BONDS**!?

BUT **WHY**--?

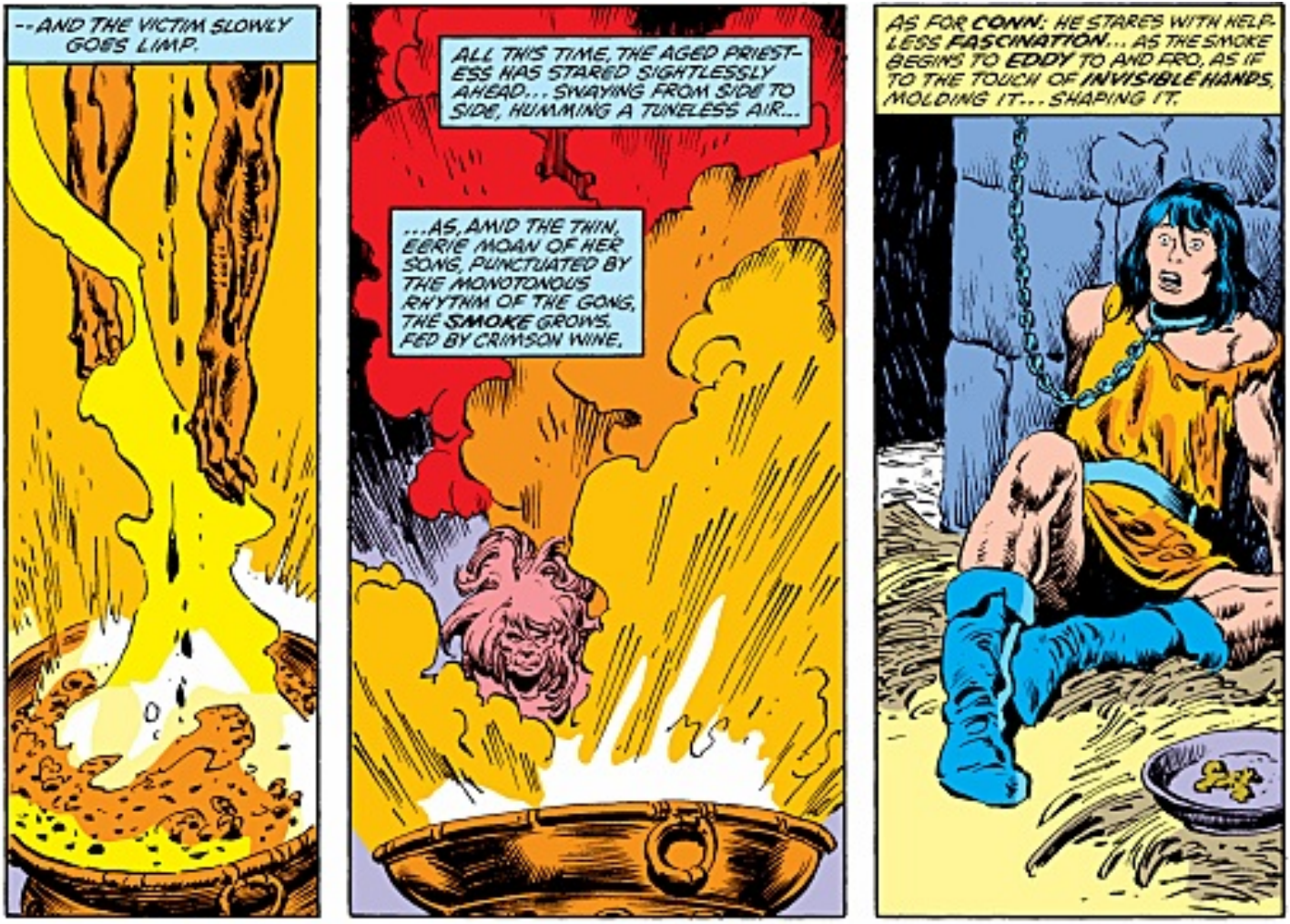
OH, I SEE!

YOU DON'T WANT ME TO **STARVE** WHILE YOU FIGURE OUT MY **RANSOM**, IS THAT IT?

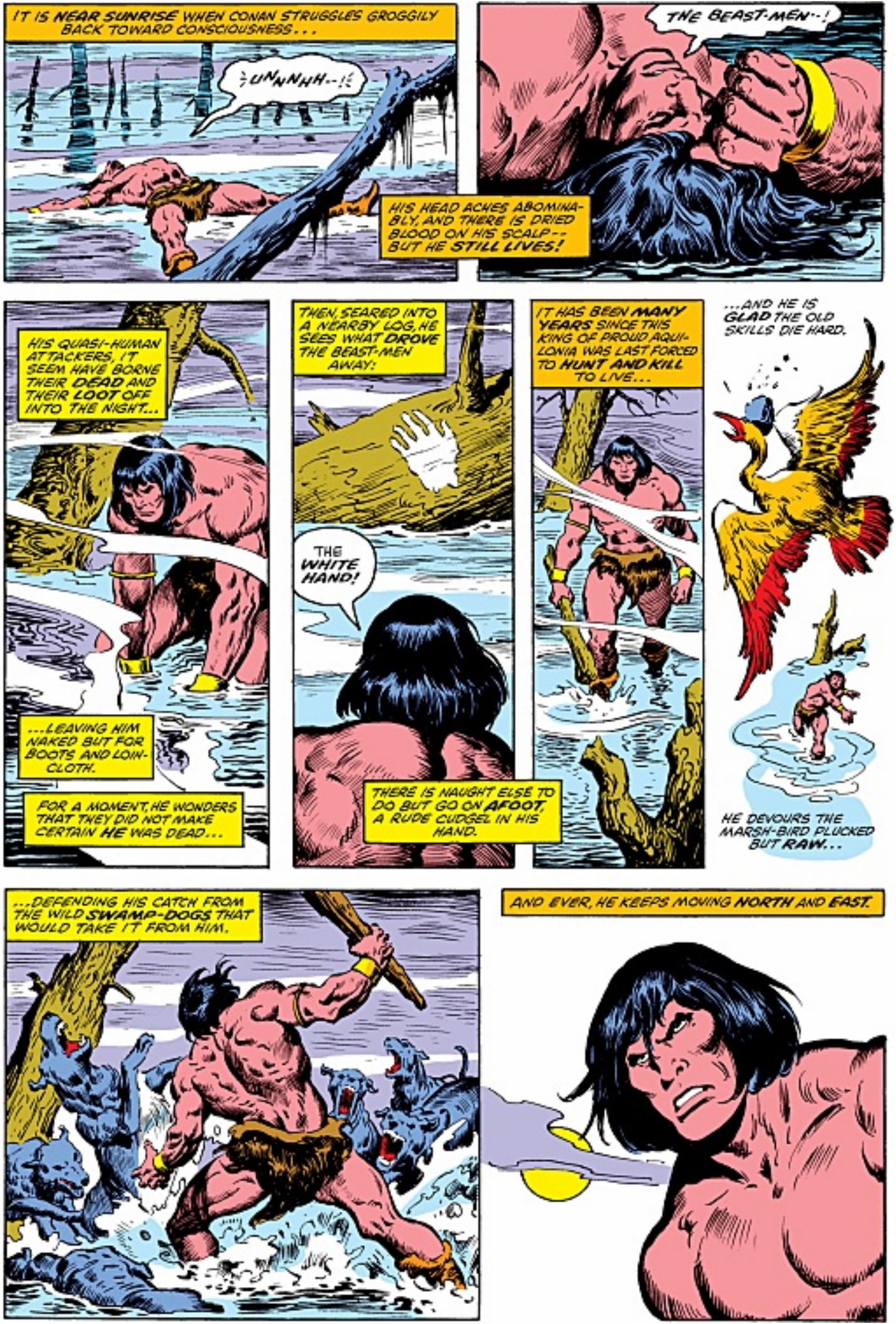
BUT, AS THE YOUTH DEVOURS THE COLD, TASTELESS SCRAPS, HE KNOWS SOMEHOW THAT THERE WILL **BE** NO RANSOM...

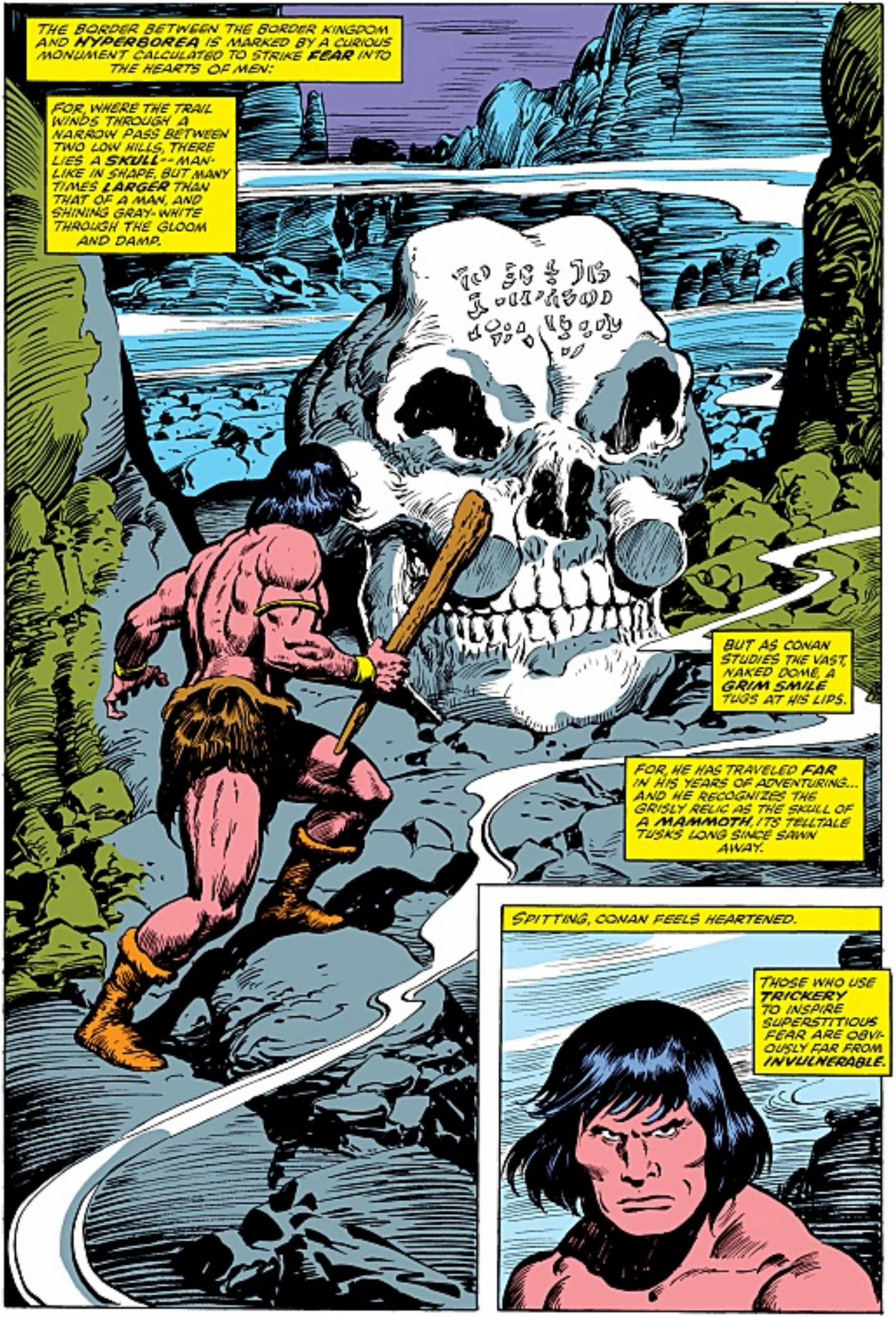
...THAT HE IS MEANT **NEVER** TO LEAVE THIS VAST HALL... **ALIVE**.

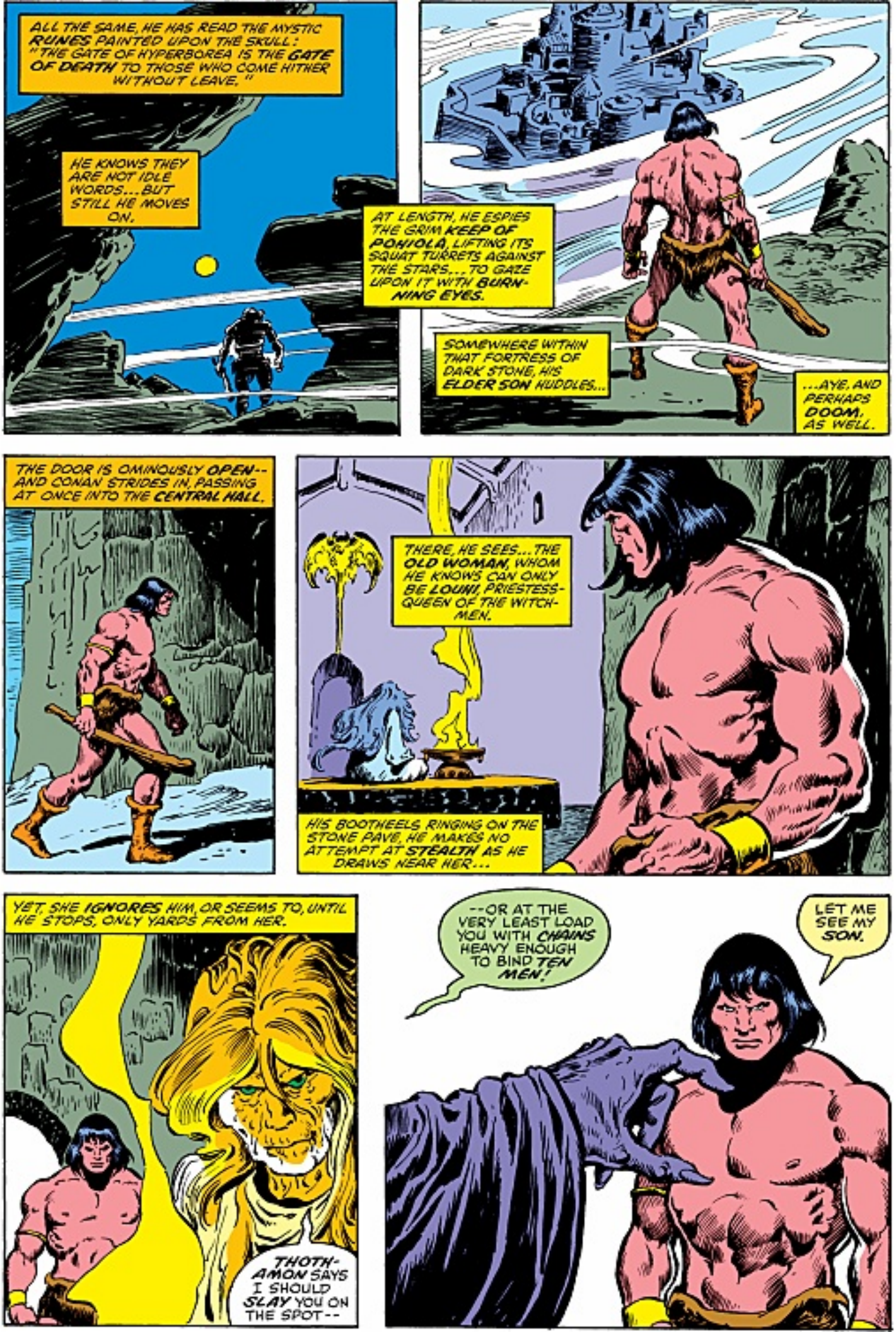
HIS FATHER HAS TAUGHT HIM, HOWEVER, TO ACCEPT WHAT YOU CANNOT CHANGE...
...AND CATCH SUCH SLEEP AS WILL REFRESH YOU, IN CASE YOU CAN CHANGE IT, AFTER ALL!
THE DULL SOUND OF A GONG AWAKENS HIM... AND CONN FINDS THAT IN THIS GLOOMY PILE OF STONE WHERE THE LIGHT OF DAY NEVER PIERCES, HE HAS LOST ALL SENSE OF TIME.
THE SMALL GONG, HE SEES, IS CARVED IN THE SHAPE OF A HUMAN SKULL.
AND, ON A CIRCULAR STONE DAIS IN THE HALL'S CENTER, THE WITCHWOMAN IS SEATED, AS A GREAT COPPER BOWL OF GLOWING COALS SHEDS A WAVERING LIGHT THE COLOR OF BLOOD ON HER FACE.
THEN, THE WITCHMEN ENTER, STILL CLAD IN THEIR COWLS AND MASKS... BUT NOT ALONE.
CONN RECALLS THAT IN THE SWAMP DAYS BEFORE, THEY HAD TAKEN THIS MAN CAPTIVE.
NNGGUH--!?!
DESPITE THE POOR DEVIL'S HIGH-BESTIAL STATE, CONN FEELS A SUDDEN PITY FOR THIS WRITHING, HELPLESS, PLEADING SPECIMEN--
--AS HE PLAYS UNWILLING WITNESS TO A TERRIBLE CEREMONY--
NNNGAA! NNGGAAA!!

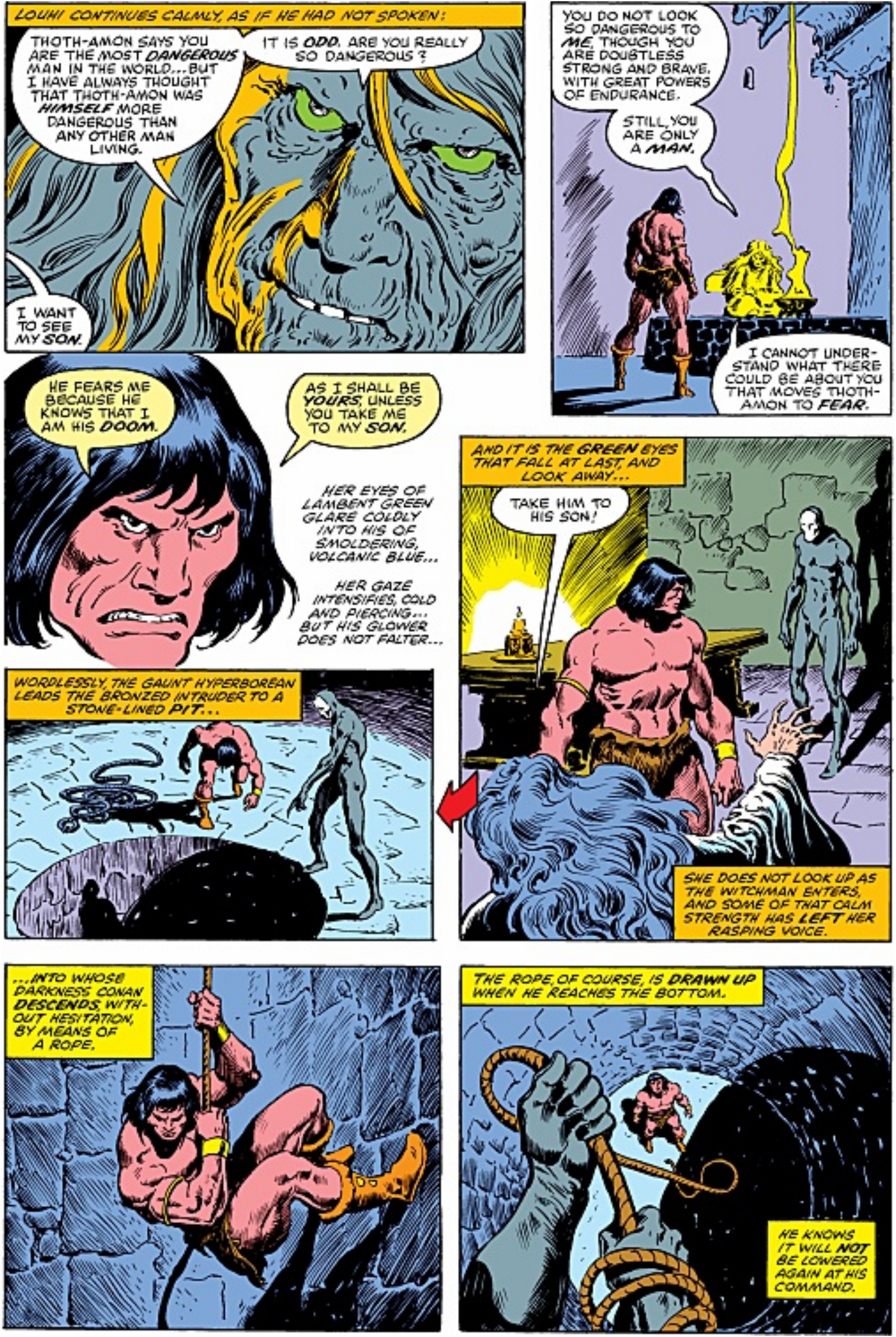

--AND THE VICTIM SLOWLY GOES LIMP.
ALL THIS TIME, THE AGED PRIESTESS HAS STARED SIGHTLESSLY AHEAD... SWAYING FROM SIDE TO SIDE, HUMMING A TUNELESS AIR...
...AS, AMID THE THIN, EERIE MOAN OF HER SONG, PUNCTUATED BY THE MONOTONOUS RHYTHM OF THE GONG, THE SMOKE GROWS, FED BY CRIMSON WINE.
AS FOR CONN: HE STARES WITH HELPLESS FASCINATION... AS THE SMOKE BEGINS TO EDDY TO AND FRO, AS IF TO THE TOUCH OF INVISIBLE HANDS, MOLDING IT... SHAPING IT.

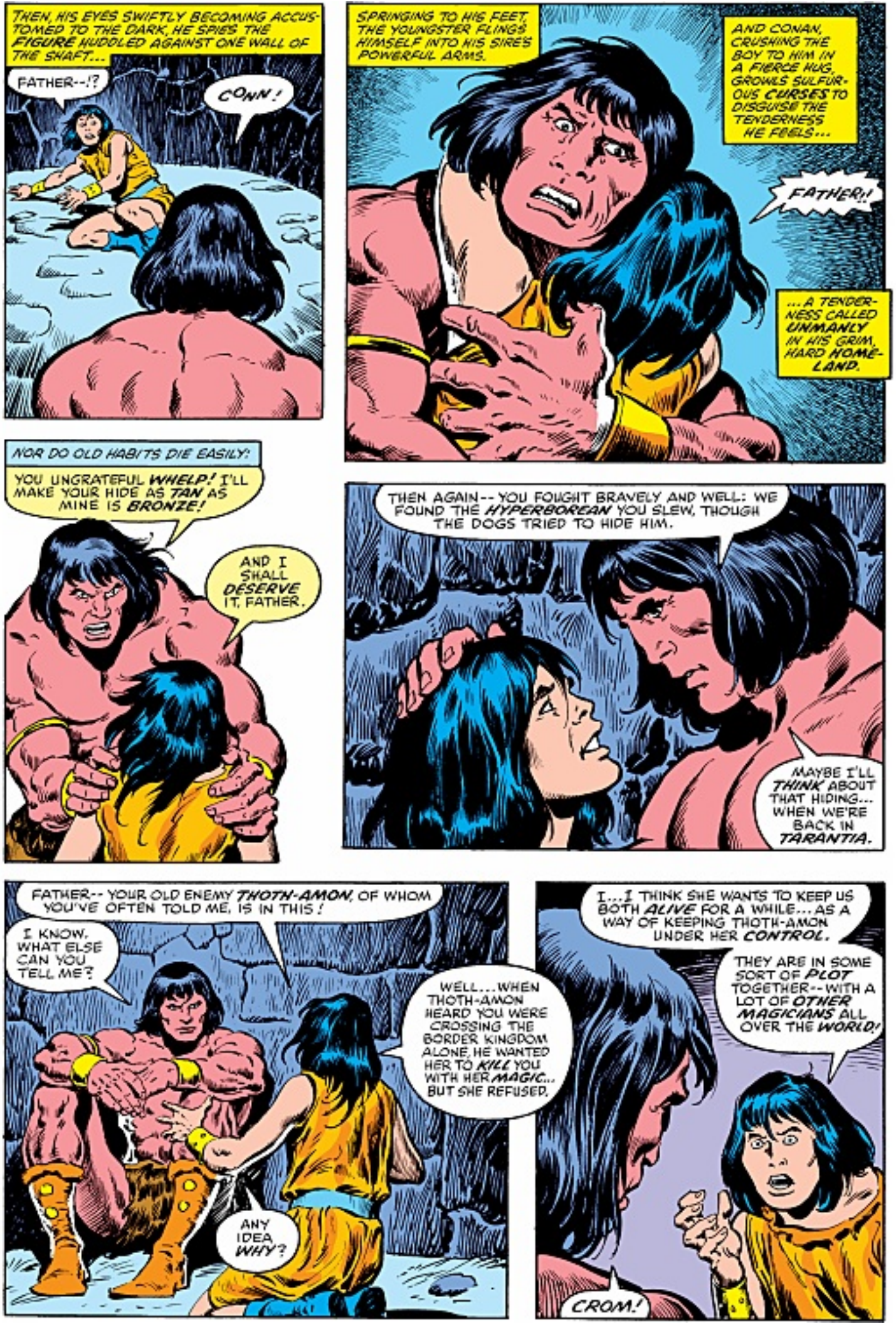
FOR, THE ROILING CLOUD OF SMOKE IS TAKING THE SHAPE OF A MAN... TALL, GAUNT... DRAPED IN EASTERN ROBES.
AND SUDDENLY, CONN KNOWS HE HAS HEARD THOSE ALOOF, AQUILINE FEATURES DESCRIBED IN GRIM DETAIL... BY HIS FATHER!
HAIL, O LOUHI...!
GREETINGS... THOTH-AMON!
NOW, IN TRUTH, DO THE CHILLY CLAWS OF FEAR CLOSE AROUND CONN'S HEART... FOR HE KNOWS HE IS IN THE CLUTCHES OF EARTH'S MIGHTIEST EVIL MAGICIAN...
CROM.
...THE STYGIAN SORCERER WHO HAS SWORN, LONG SINCE, TO BRING CONAN THE CIMMERIAN DOWN TO A TERRIBLE DEATH -- AND TO CRUSH AQUILONIA ITSELF INTO THE MIRE!

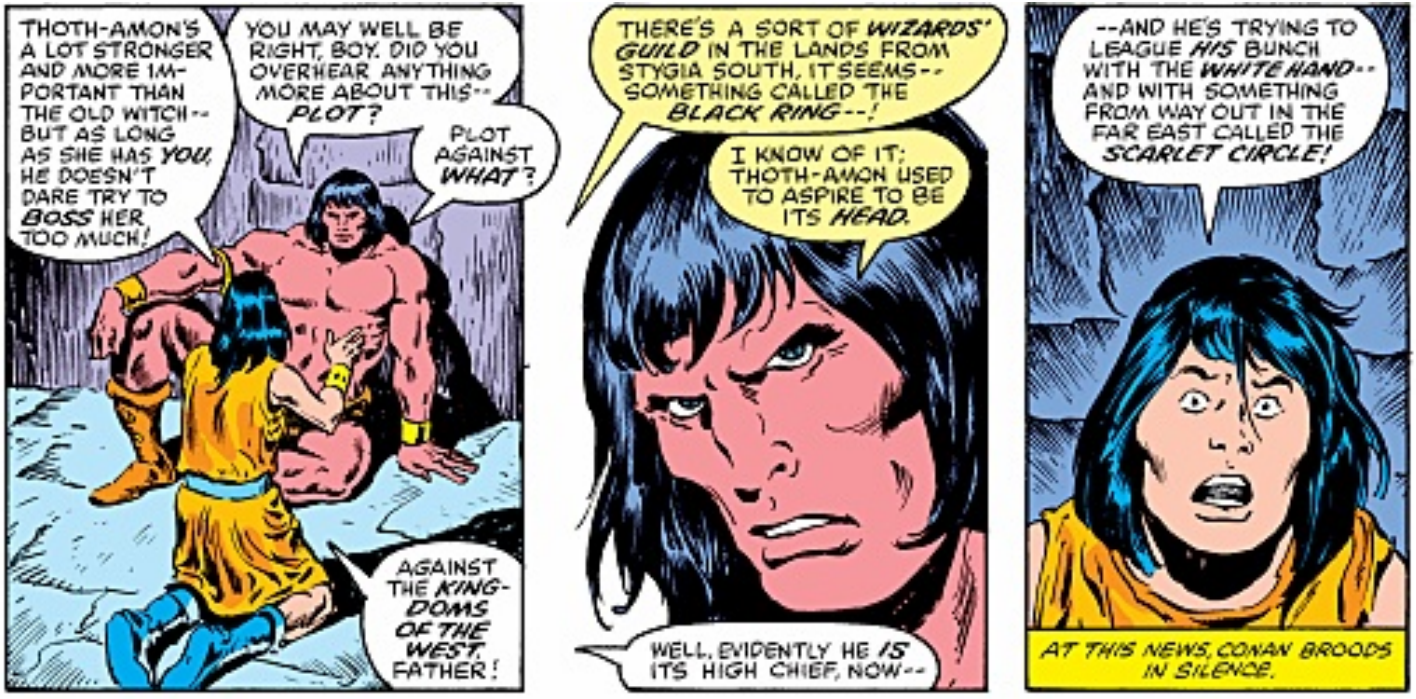

IT IS NEAR SUNRISE WHEN CONAN STRUGGLES GROGGILY BACK TOWARD CONSCIOUSNESS...
UNNNHH--!
HIS HEAD ACHES ABOMINABLY, AND THERE IS DRIED BLOOD ON HIS SCALP--BUT HE STILL LIVES!
THE BEAST-MEN--!
HIS QUASI-HUMAN ATTACKERS, IT SEEM HAVE BORNE THEIR DEAD AND THEIR LOOT OFF INTO THE NIGHT...
...LEAVING HIM NAKED BUT FOR BOOTS AND LOINCLOTH.
FOR A MOMENT, HE WONDERS THAT THEY DID NOT MAKE CERTAIN HE WAS DEAD...
THEN, SEARED INTO A NEARBY LOG, HE SEES WHAT DROVE THE BEAST-MEN AWAY:
THE WHITE HAND!
THERE IS NAUGHT ELSE TO DO BUT GO ON AFOOT, A RUDE CUDGEL IN HIS HAND.
IT HAS BEEN MANY YEARS SINCE THIS KING OF PROUD AQUILONIA WAS LAST FORCED TO HUNT AND KILL TO LIVE...
...AND HE IS GLAD THE OLD SKILLS DIE HARD.
HE DEVOURS THE MARSH-BIRD PLUCKED BUT RAW...
...DEFENDING HIS CATCH FROM THE WILD SWAMP-DOGS THAT WOULD TAKE IT FROM HIM.
AND EVER, HE KEEPS MOVING NORTH AND EAST.

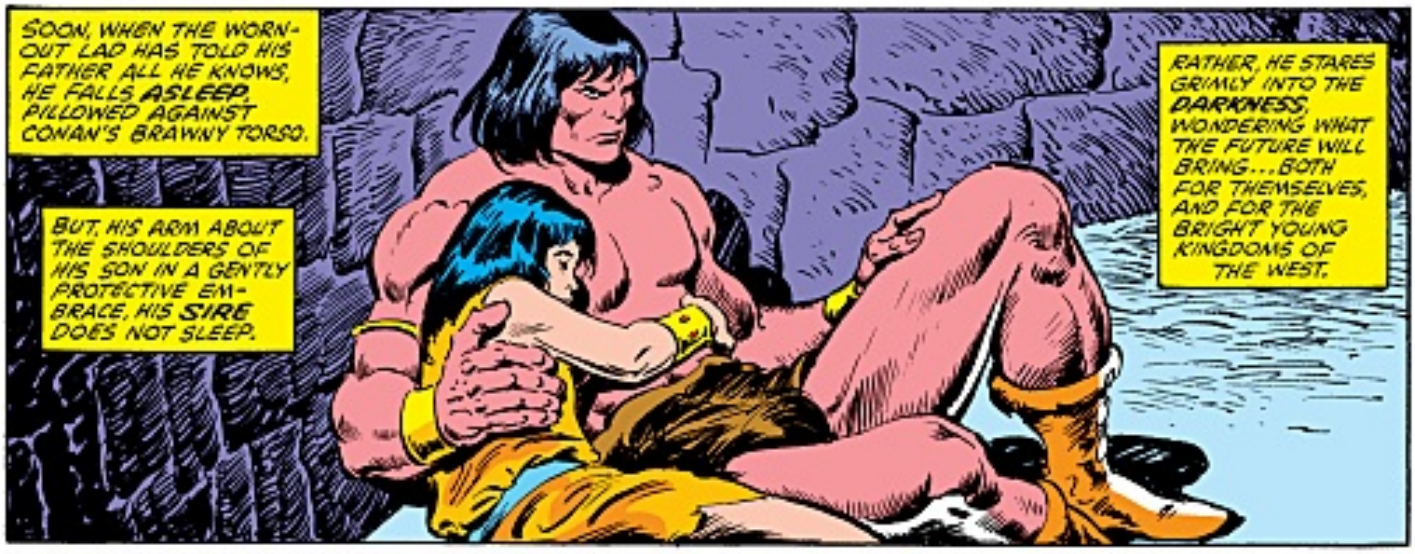

THE BORDER BETWEEN THE BORDER KINGDOM AND HYPERBOREA IS MARKED BY A CURIOUS MONUMENT CALCULATED TO STRIKE FEAR INTO THE HEARTS OF MEN:
FOR, WHERE THE TRAIL WINDS THROUGH A NARROW PASS BETWEEN TWO LOW HILLS, THERE LIES A SKULL -- MAN-LIKE IN SHAPE, BUT MANY TIMES LARGER THAN THAT OF A MAN, AND SHINING GRAY-WHITE THROUGH THE GLOOM AND DAMP.
BUT AS CONAN STUDIES THE VAST, NAKED DOME, A GRIM SMILE TUGS AT HIS LIPS.
FOR, HE HAS TRAVELED FAR IN HIS YEARS OF ADVENTURING... AND HE RECOGNIZES THE GRISLY RELIC AS THE SKULL OF A MAMMOTH, ITS TELLTALE TUSKS LONG SINCE SAWN AWAY.
SPITTING, CONAN FEELS HEARTENED.
THOSE WHO USE TRICKERY TO INSPIRE SUPERSTITIOUS FEAR ARE OBVIOUSLY FAR FROM INVULNERABLE.

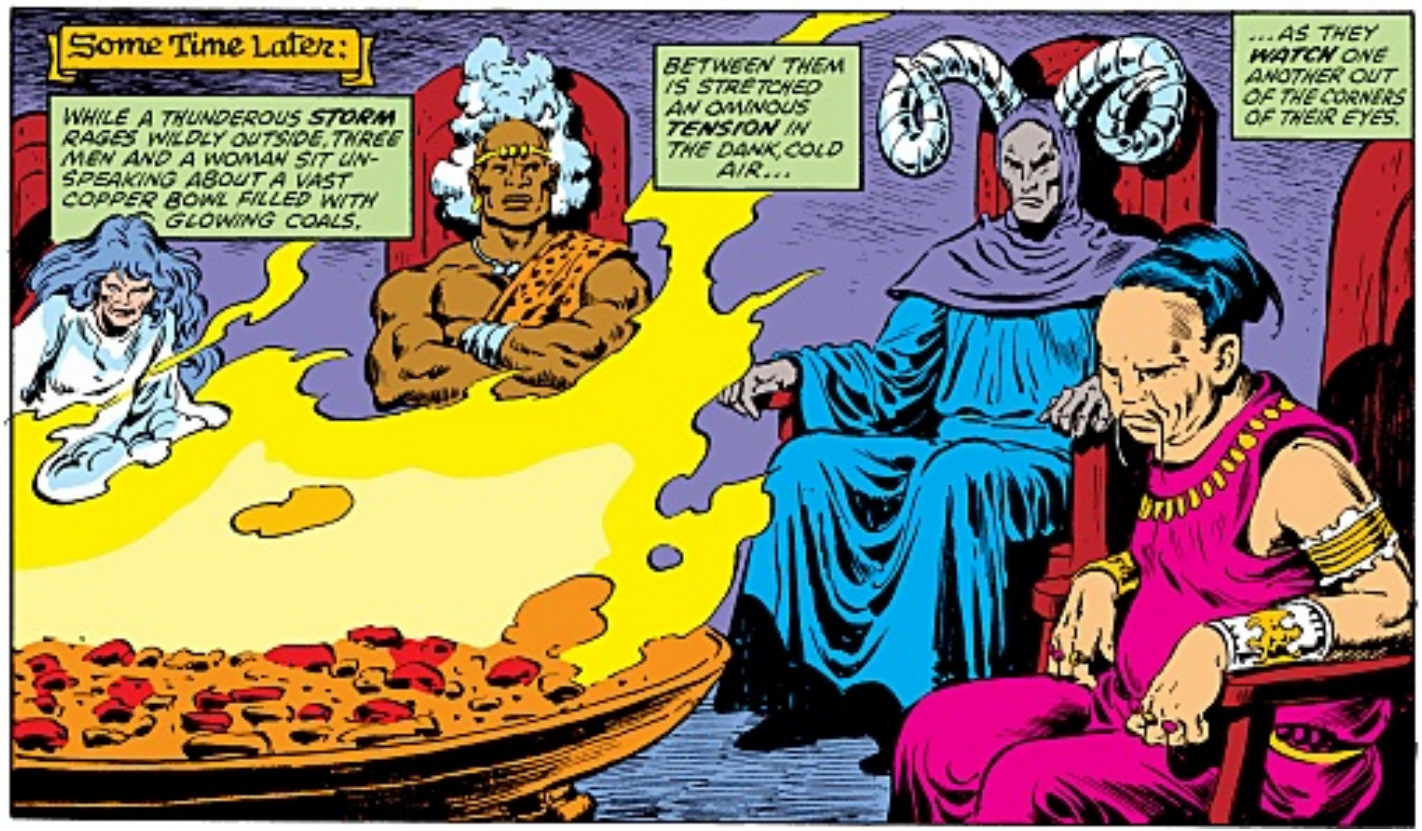

ALL THE SAME, HE HAS READ THE MYSTIC RUNES PAINTED UPON THE SKULL: "THE GATE OF HYPERBOREA IS THE GATE OF DEATH TO THOSE WHO COME HITHER WITHOUT LEAVE."
HE KNOWS THEY ARE NOT IDLE WORDS... BUT STILL HE MOVES ON.
AT LENGTH, HE ESPIES THE GRIM KEEP OF PONIOLA, LIFTING ITS SQUAT TURRETS AGAINST THE STARS... TO GAZE UPON IT WITH BURNING EYES.
SOMEWHERE WITHIN THAT FORTRESS OF DARK STONE, HIS ELDER SON HUDDLES...
...AYE, AND PERHAPS DOOM, AS WELL.
THE DOOR IS OMINOUSLY OPEN-- AND CONAN STRIDES IN, PASSING AT ONCE INTO THE CENTRAL HALL.
THERE, HE SEES... THE OLD WOMAN, WHOM HE KNOWS CAN ONLY BE LOUHI, PRIESTESS-QUEEN OF THE WITCHMEN.
HIS BOOTHEELS RINGING ON THE STONE PAVE, HE MAKES NO ATTEMPT AT STEALTH AS HE DRAWS NEAR HER...
YET, SHE IGNORES HIM, OR SEEMS TO, UNTIL HE STOPS, ONLY YARDS FROM HER.
THOTH-AMON SAYS I SHOULD SLAY YOU ON THE SPOT--
--OR AT THE VERY LEAST LOAD YOU WITH CHAINS HEAVY ENOUGH TO BIND TEN MEN!
LET ME SEE MY SON.


LOUHI CONTINUES CALMLY, AS IF HE HAD NOT SPOKEN:
THOTH-AMON SAYS YOU ARE THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN THE WORLD... BUT I HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT THOTH-AMON WAS HIMSELF MORE DANGEROUS THAN ANY OTHER MAN LIVING.
IT IS ODD. ARE YOU REALLY SO DANGEROUS?
I WANT TO SEE MY SON.
YOU DO NOT LOOK SO DANGEROUS TO ME, THOUGH YOU ARE DOUBTLESS STRONG AND BRAVE, WITH GREAT POWERS OF ENDURANCE.
STILL, YOU ARE ONLY A MAN.
I CANNOT UNDERSTAND WHAT THERE COULD BE ABOUT YOU THAT MOVES THOTH-AMON TO FEAR.
HE FEARS ME BECAUSE HE KNOWS THAT I AM HIS DOOM.
AS I SHALL BE YOURS, UNLESS YOU TAKE ME TO MY SON.
HER EYES OF LAMBENT GREEN GLARE COLDLY INTO HIS OF SMOLDERING, VOLCANIC BLUE...
HER GAZE INTENSIFIES, COLD AND PIERCING... BUT HIS GLOWER DOES NOT FALTER...
AND IT IS THE GREEN EYES THAT FALL AT LAST, AND LOOK AWAY...
TAKE HIM TO HIS SON!
SHE DOES NOT LOOK UP AS THE WITCHMAN ENTERS, AND SOME OF THAT CALM STRENGTH HAS LEFT HER RASPING VOICE.
WORDLESSLY, THE GAUNT HYPERBOREAN LEADS THE BRONZED INTRUDER TO A STONE-LINED PIT...
...INTO WHOSE DARKNESS CONAN DESCENDS, WITHOUT HESITATION, BY MEANS OF A ROPE.
THE ROPE, OF COURSE, IS DRAWN UP WHEN HE REACHES THE BOTTOM.
HE KNOWS IT WILL NOT BE LOWERED AGAIN AT HIS COMMAND.


THEN, HIS EYES SWIFTLY BECOMING ACCUSTOMED TO THE DARK, HE SPIES THE FIGURE HUDDLED AGAINST ONE WALL OF THE SHAFT...
FATHER--!?
CONN!
SPRINGING TO HIS FEET, THE YOUNGSTER FLINGS HIMSELF INTO HIS SIRE'S POWERFUL ARMS.
AND CONAN, CRUSHING THE BOY TO HIM IN A FIERCE HUG, GROWLS SULFUROUS CURSES TO DISGUISE THE TENDERNESS HE FEELS...
FATHER!!
...A TENDERNESS CALLED UNMANLY IN HIS GRIM, HARD HOMELAND.
NOR DO OLD HABITS DIE EASILY:
YOU UNGRATEFUL WHELP! I'LL MAKE YOUR HIDE AS TAN AS MINE IS BRONZE!
AND I SHALL DESERVE IT, FATHER.
THEN AGAIN-- YOU FOUGHT BRAVELY AND WELL: WE FOUND THE HYPERBOREAN YOU SLEW, THOUGH THE DOGS TRIED TO HIDE HIM.
MAYBE I'LL THINK ABOUT THAT HIDING... WHEN WE'RE BACK IN TARANTIA.
FATHER-- YOUR OLD ENEMY THOTH-AMON, OF WHOM YOU'VE OFTEN TOLD ME, IS IN THIS!
I KNOW. WHAT ELSE CAN YOU TELL ME?
WELL... WHEN THOTH-AMON HEARD YOU WERE CROSSING THE BORDER KINGDOM ALONE, HE WANTED HER TO KILL YOU WITH HER MAGIC... BUT SHE REFUSED.
ANY IDEA WHY?
I... I THINK SHE WANTS TO KEEP US BOTH ALIVE FOR A WHILE... AS A WAY OF KEEPING THOTH-AMON UNDER HER CONTROL.
THEY ARE IN SOME SORT OF PLOT TOGETHER-- WITH A LOT OF OTHER MAGICIANS ALL OVER THE WORLD!
CROM!


THOTH-AMON'S A LOT STRONGER AND MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE OLD WITCH-- BUT AS LONG AS SHE HAS YOU, HE DOESN'T DARE TRY TO BOSS HER TOO MUCH!
YOU MAY WELL BE RIGHT, BOY. DID YOU OVERHEAR ANYTHING MORE ABOUT THIS-- PLOT?
PLOT AGAINST WHAT?
AGAINST THE KINGDOMS OF THE WEST, FATHER!
THERE'S A SORT OF WIZARDS' GUILD IN THE LANDS FROM STYGIA SOUTH, IT SEEMS-- SOMETHING CALLED THE BLACK RING--!
I KNOW OF IT; THOTH-AMON USED TO ASPIRE TO BE ITS HEAD.
WELL, EVIDENTLY HE IS ITS HIGH CHIEF, NOW--
--AND HE'S TRYING TO LEAGUE HIS BUNCH WITH THE WHITE HAND-- AND WITH SOMETHING FROM WAY OUT IN THE FAR EAST CALLED THE SCARLET CIRCLE!
AT THIS NEWS, CONAN BROODS IN SILENCE.


SOON, WHEN THE WORN-OUT LAD HAS TOLD HIS FATHER ALL HE KNOWS, HE FALLS ASLEEP, PILLOWED AGAINST CONAN'S BRAWNY TORSO.
BUT, HIS ARM ABOUT THE SHOULDERS OF HIS SON IN A GENTLY PROTECTIVE EMBRACE, HIS SIRE DOES NOT SLEEP.
RATHER, HE STARES GRIMLY INTO THE DARKNESS, WONDERING WHAT THE FUTURE WILL BRING... BOTH FOR THEMSELVES, AND FOR THE BRIGHT YOUNG KINGDOMS OF THE WEST.


Some Time Later:
WHILE A THUNDEROUS STORM RAGES WILDLY OUTSIDE, THREE MEN AND A WOMAN SIT UNSPEAKING ABOUT A VAST COPPER BOWL FILLED WITH GLOWING COALS.
BETWEEN THEM IS STRETCHED AN OMINOUS TENSION IN THE DANK, COLD AIR...
...AS THEY WATCH ONE ANOTHER OUT OF THE CORNERS OF THEIR EYES.

THEN, ESCORTED BY A DOUBLE FILE OF THE BLACK-CLAD ONES, CONAN AND HIS SON ARE BROUGHT TO THE FOOT OF THE DAIS...

...WHERE CONAN STARES DIRECTLY INTO THE ICY, SHADOWED EYES OF THOTH-AMON OF STYGIA, WHO SPEAKS TO HIM IN HEAVILY ACCENTED AQUILONIAN:
SO, WE MEET AGAIN, DOG OF A CIMMERIAN WHO HAS BECOME A KING!

CONAN'S ANSWER IS FAR BRIEFER...AND EVEN MORE TO THE POINT.
VERY WELL, THEN, IF YOU WILL PLAY THE DEFIANT ONE, LET ME INTRODUCE YOU TO THOSE HOSTS YOU DO NOT KNOW...

THIS IS THE DIVINE PRA-EUN, LORD OF THE SCARLET CIRCLE... SACRED GOD-KING OF JUNGLE-GIRDED ANGKHOR IN THE REMOTE EAST.
THE SO-GREAT KING OF AQUILONIA AND I ARE OLD FRIENDS... THOUGH HE KNOWS ME NOT.
HE ONCE DID ME THE KINDEST OF FAVORS.
OH? I KNOW NOT THIS TALE, PRA-EUN.

BUT YES! JUST OVER A DECADE AGO, HE DID TO DEATH THE FORMIDABLE YAH CHIENG, SORCERER OF KHITAI-- MY GREATEST RIVAL.
HAD HE NOT SLAIN YAH CHIENG, I SHOULD NOT TODAY BE THE SUPREME MASTER OF THE SCARLET CIRCLE.
I AM MOST BEHOLDEN TO THE BRAVE MONARCH OF AQUILONIA.
BUT THERE IS NO WARMTH IN THE EASTERNER'S VOICE...

...AND THOTH-AMON CONTINUES:
THIS, CIMMERIAN, IS THE GREAT SHAMAN NENAUNIR, PROPHET AND HIGH PRIEST OF DAMBALLAH-- AS HIS PEOPLE CALL FATHER SET-- IN FAR OFF ZEMBABWEI.
AT ONE WORD FROM NENAUNIR, THREE MILLION BLACKS WILL ARISE-- TO STEEP ALL THE WORLD SOUTH OF KUSH WITH FLAME AND BLOOD!

THIS MAN DOES NOT LOOK SO DANGEROUS TO ME, THOTH-AMON, WITHOUT THE AQUILONIAN ARMY BEHIND HIM!
WHY DO YOU FEAR HIM SO, STYGIAN?
A DARKER HUE STAINS THE FEATURES OF THOTH-AMON... BUT, BEFORE HE CAN SPEAK--
I AGREE WITH THE LORD OF ZEMBABWEI!
THAT IS WHY I HAVE PLANNED A SMALL ENTERTAINMENT FOR THE PLEASURE OF MY GUESTS. KAMOINEN!

AT LOUHI'S BIDDING, ONE OF THE WITCHMEN STEPS FORTH...
YOU HAVE BUT TO COMMAND, O AVATAR OF THE WHITE HAND!

BEAT THE CIMMERIAN TO HIS KNEES BEFORE US-- SO THAT MY COLLEAGUES CAN SEE THEY HAVE LITTLE TO FEAR FROM HIM!
AYE, O QUEEN...!
YOUNG CONN HAS ALREADY TOLD HIM OF THE POWER OF THOSE SLIM BLACK RODS, OF COURSE...

YET NOW, SUDDENLY, BURSTING FREE, THE BOY CRIES OUT IN CIMMERIAN-- WHICH ONLY HE AND HIS SIRE UNDERSTAND--!
FATHER! REMEMBER WHAT I TOLD YOU ABOUT HOW THEIR WITCH-RODS WORK!
THEN, THIN STRONG FINGERS PULL THE LAD BACK.

CONAN RECALLS WHAT HIS SON TOLD HIM HOURS AGO:
THAT THE WITCHMEN PLY THEIR RODS AGAINST SENSITIVE NERVE CLUSTERS!
NOISELESSLY THE TWO MEN CIRCLE EACH OTHER FOR LONG, TENSE MOMENTS...

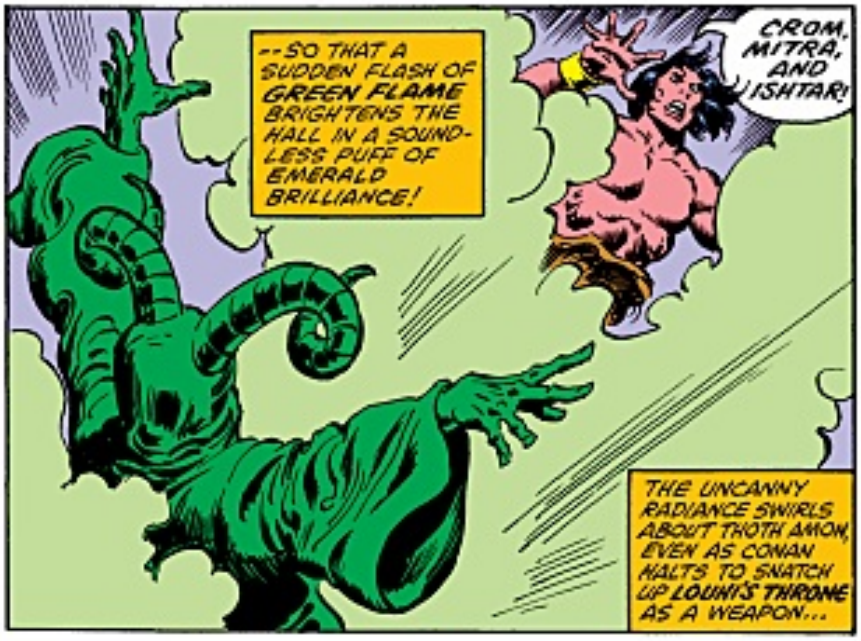
THEN, AS CONAN SEEMS TO LOWER HIS GUARD FOR AN INSTANT, HIS OPPONENT LEAPS TO THE BAIT!
AS THE ONCE-BARBARIAN SMASHES HIS FOE WITH AN IRON FIST, THE POWER-ROD SCARCELY GRAZES HIS LEFT SHOULDER--
ARRF!
YET, IT SENDS A BOLT OF PAIN LANCING THROUGH HIS BODY!
:UNNHH!:
HERE, LOUHI! MY KNEES ARE BENT, RIGHT ENOUGH--
--BUT ONLY SO THAT I MAKE BETTER USE OF YOUR PALE-HAIRED, BLOODLESS WORSHIPPER--
--THAN HE HAS EVER SEEN BEFORE!
AAAAA
AS THE FLAILING FIGURE HITS THE HUGE COPPER BOWL, IT GOES OVER WITH A NOISY CLANG--
--AND THE NEXT SOUND HEARD IN THE VAST HALL IS THE SCREAMING OF LOUHI, AS HER WHITE ROBES SUDDENLY BURST AFLAME!
AAIEEE

LOOK OUT, PRA-EUN! THE COALS--!
IN HIS CLUMSY HASTE TO FLEE, HOWEVER, THE SMALLER MAN KNOCKS OVER HIS OWN THRONE--
AAAGGG
--TRIPPING ACROSS ITS LEGS, TO FALL INTO THE PUDDLE OF FIRE!
NOW, AT LAST, THE WITCH-MEN ACT--
UGKK
--BUT THEY ARE TOO LATE!
NOR HAS CONAN TUTORED HIS SON FOR NAUGHT IN THE ART OF ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE...
UNNH
...USING ALL WEAPONS AT HIS DISPOSAL!
MMFF
AND, IN A SEQUENCE OF TEN SECONDS, HE FELLS FOUR MEN WITH A WOODEN STOOL...!
THEN COMES THE WAR-CRY OF NENAUNIR--
SHAKA-LAI!!
A HEAVY WOODEN THRONE-CHAIR IS LIFTED AND HURLED BY THE SHAMAN OF ZEMBABWE!--
BUT, CONAN DODGES IT WITH A STILL-PANTHERISH AGILITY--

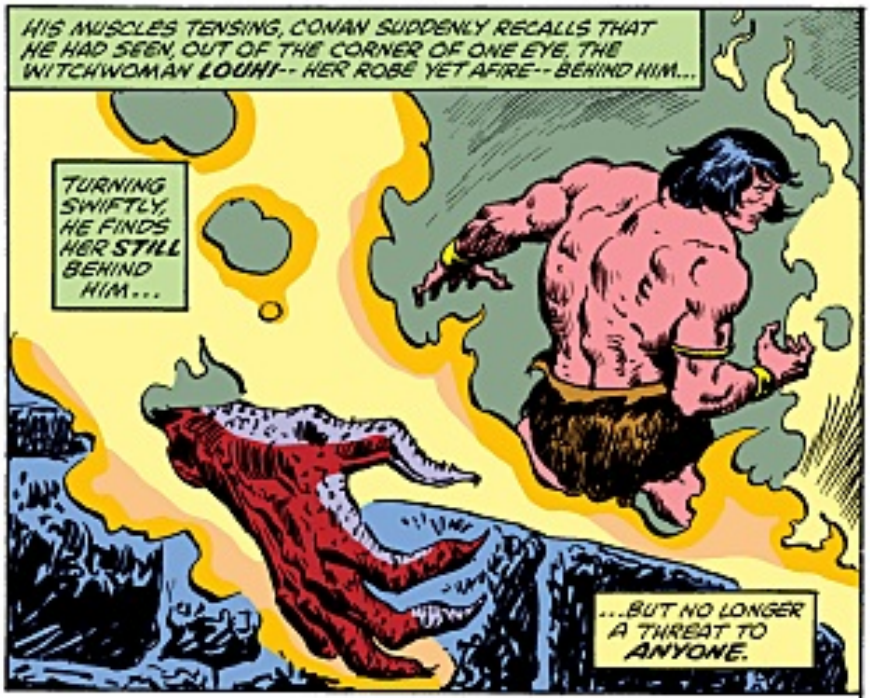
--AND IT SMASHES INTO THE CIRCLE OF HIS HYPERBOREAN FOES, SENDING THEM SPRAWLING LIKE TENPINS!
ARRRR

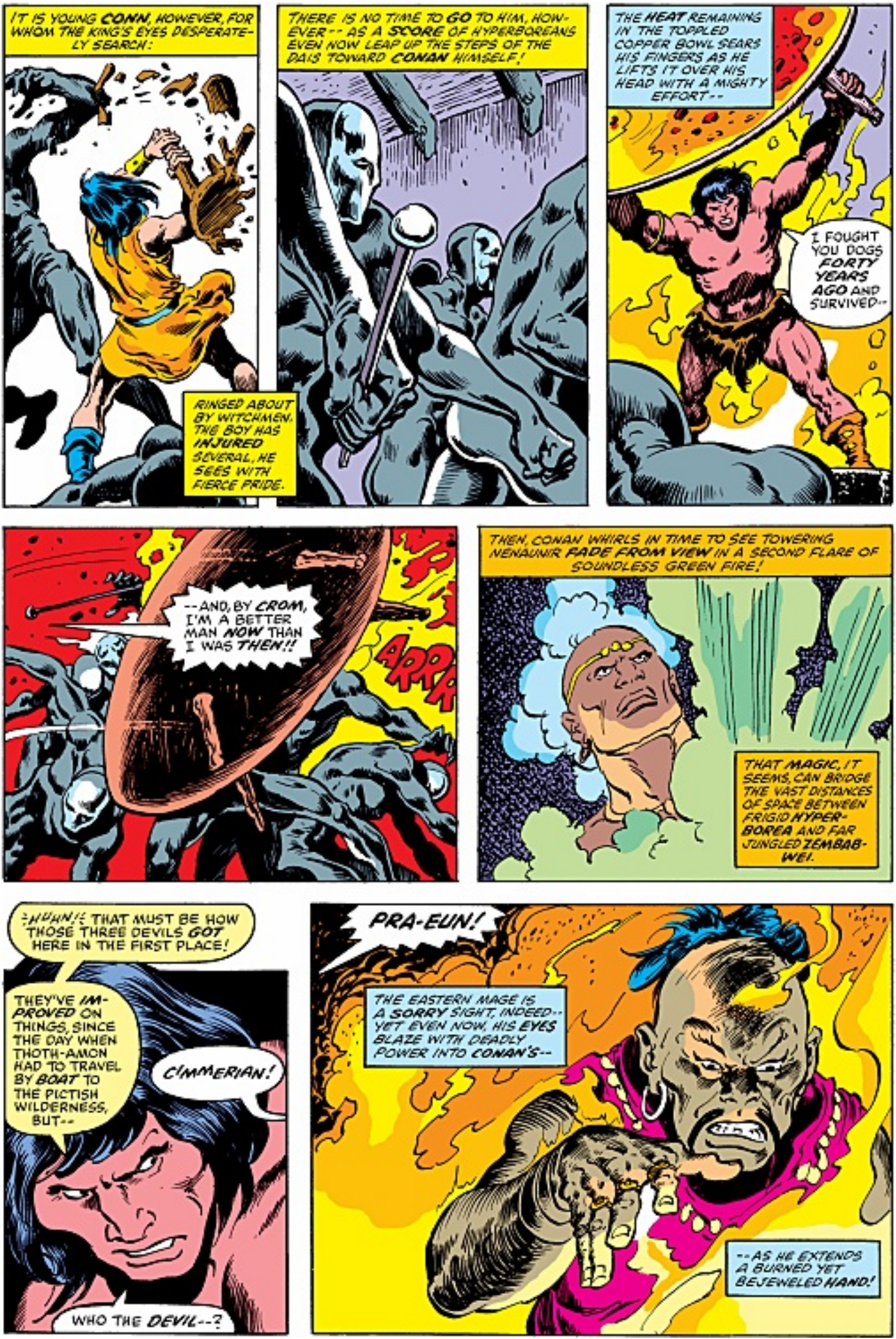
HAH! WITH YOUR HOSTESS' VILE MINIONS OUT OF THE WAY, THOTH-AMON--

--IT'S TIME I SETTLED MY LONG-STANDING SCORE WITH YOU!
YET, ALREADY, THE STYGIAN MAGE GESTURES AT THE FLAMES OVER WHICH THE CIMMERIAN LEAPS--


--SO THAT A SUDDEN FLASH OF GREEN FLAME BRIGHTENS THE HALL IN A SOUNDLESS PUFF OF EMERALD BRILLIANCE!
CROM, MITRA, AND ISHTAR!
THE UNCANNY RADIANCE SWIRLS ABOUT THOTH AMON, EVEN AS CONAN HALTS TO SNATCH UP LOUHI'S THRONE AS A WEAPON...

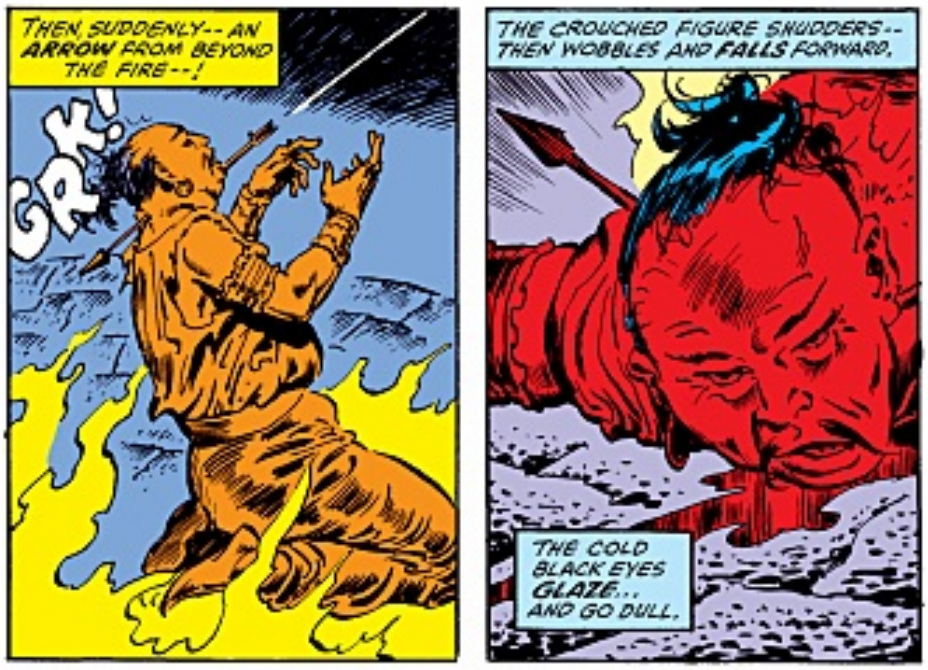
BUT, EVEN THE BRONZED MONARCH'S BLURRING SPEED IS TOO SLOW!
DAMN!
NEXT INSTANT, THE MASTER SORCERER HAS FADED FROM SIGHT.

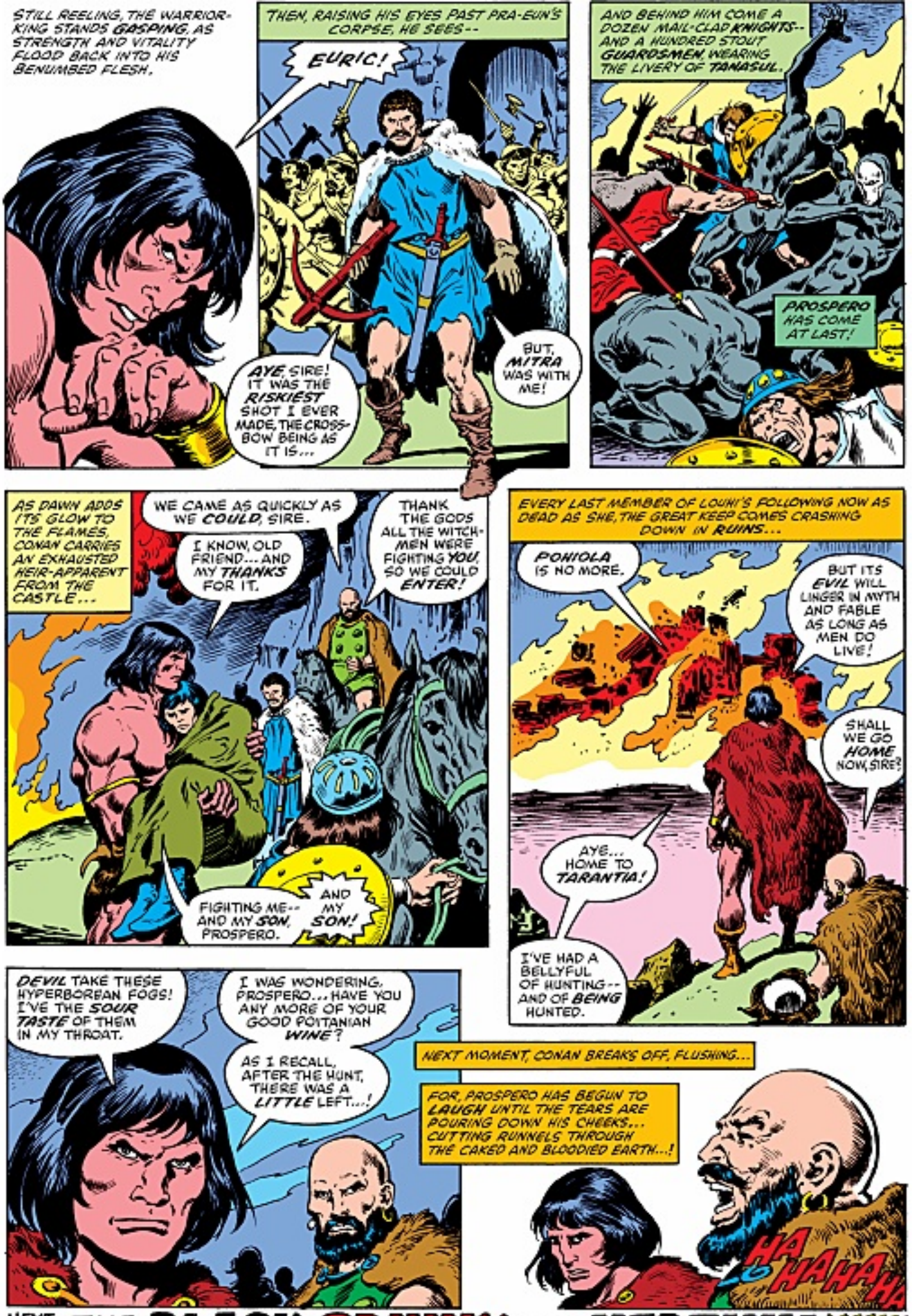

HIS MUSCLES TENSING, CONAN SUDDENLY RECALLS THAT HE HAD SEEN, OUT OF THE CORNER OF ONE EYE, THE WITCHWOMAN LOUHI-- HER ROBE YET AFIRE-- BEHIND HIM...
TURNING SWIFTLY, HE FINDS HER STILL BEHIND HIM...
...BUT NO LONGER A THREAT TO ANYONE.


IT IS YOUNG CONN, HOWEVER, FOR WHOM THE KING'S EYES DESPERATELY SEARCH:
RINGED ABOUT BY WITCHMEN, THE BOY HAS INJURED SEVERAL, HE SEES WITH FIERCE PRIDE.
THERE IS NO TIME TO GO TO HIM, HOWEVER -- AS A SCORE OF HYPERBOREANS EVEN NOW LEAP UP THE STEPS OF THE DAIS TOWARD CONAN HIMSELF!
THE HEAT REMAINING IN THE TOPPLED COPPER BOWL SEARS HIS FINGERS AS HE LIFTS IT OVER HIS HEAD WITH A MIGHTY EFFORT--
I FOUGHT YOU DOGS FORTY YEARS AGO AND SURVIVED--
--AND, BY CROM, I'M A BETTER MAN NOW THAN I WAS THEN!!
ARRR
THEN, CONAN WHIRLS IN TIME TO SEE TOWERING NENAUNIR FADE FROM VIEW IN A SECOND FLARE OF SOUNDLESS GREEN FIRE!
THAT MAGIC, IT SEEMS, CAN BRIDGE THE VAST DISTANCES OF SPACE BETWEEN FRIGID HYPERBOREA AND FAR JUNGLED ZEMBABWEI.
:HUHN!: THAT MUST BE HOW THOSE THREE DEVILS GOT HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE!
THEY'VE IMPROVED ON THINGS, SINCE THE DAY WHEN THOTH-AMON HAD TO TRAVEL BY BOAT TO THE PICTISH WILDERNESS, BUT--
CIMMERIAN!
WHO THE DEVIL--?
PRA-EUN!
THE EASTERN MAGE IS A SORRY SIGHT, INDEED-- YET EVEN NOW, HIS EYES BLAZE WITH DEADLY POWER INTO CONAN'S--
--AS HE EXTENDS A BURNED YET BEJEWELED HAND!

THAT SELFSAME INSTANT, A WEIRD YET IN-VISIBLE FORCE FLOWS FROM THOSE TENSE, QUIVERING FINGERS-- NUMBING CONAN'S FLESH AS IF HE HAD BEEN SUDDENLY PLUNGED INTO AN ICY RIVER--
UNNGHN!
--PARALYSIS SEIZING HIS MIGHTY LIMBS!
A MOMENT MORE, AND HE CANNOT EVEN CRY OUT, AS HE IS FROZEN INTO TOTAL IMMOBILITY...
WHILE, CROUCHED AMID THE COALS, PRA-EUN SMILES, THOUGH HIS BURNED FACE WINCES AT THE MOVEMENT OF SEARED LIPS.
SLOWLY, HE EXTENDS HIS ARM TO ITS FULL LENGTH, MUMBLING STRANGE WORDS OF POWER...
HUA-KUO CHHENG HUANG CHHI-LIN--!

--AND PAIN RIPS THROUGH CONAN'S BRONZED FRAME!
AARRRH--!
DARKNESS SWEEPS ABOUT HIM, SUCKING HIM DOWN-- DOWN--
LO-PHU MEN-SHEN CHU-JUNG--!
--AS UNHOLY GLEE BLAZES IN HIS TORMENTOR'S COLD, OPHIDIAN EYES!


THEN, SUDDENLY-- AN ARROW FROM BEYOND THE FIRE--!
GRK!
THE CROUCHED FIGURE SHUDDERS-- THEN WOBBLES AND FALLS FORWARD.
THE COLD BLACK EYES GLAZE... AND GO DULL.
PRA-EUN'S SPELL SNAPS-- AND CONAN IS FREE!
UNNH-- WHAT--?


STILL REELING, THE WARRIOR-KING STANDS GASPING, AS STRENGTH AND VITALITY FLOOD BACK INTO HIS BENUMBED FLESH.
THEN, RAISING HIS EYES PAST PRA-EUN'S CORPSE, HE SEES--
EURIC!
AYE, SIRE! IT WAS THE RISKIEST SHOT I EVER MADE, THE CROSS-BOW BEING AS IT IS...
BUT, MITRA WAS WITH ME!
AND BEHIND HIM COME A DOZEN MAIL-CLAD KNIGHTS-- AND A HUNDRED STOUT GUARDSMEN, WEARING THE LIVERY OF TANASUL.
PROSPERO HAS COME AT LAST!
AS DAWN ADDS ITS GLOW TO THE FLAMES, CONAN CARRIES AN EXHAUSTED HEIR-APPARENT FROM THE CASTLE...
WE CAME AS QUICKLY AS WE COULD, SIRE.
I KNOW, OLD FRIEND... AND MY THANKS FOR IT.
THANK THE GODS ALL THE WITCH-MEN WERE FIGHTING YOU, SO WE COULD ENTER!
FIGHTING ME-- AND MY SON, PROSPERO.
AND MY SON!
EVERY LAST MEMBER OF LOUHI'S FOLLOWING NOW AS DEAD AS SHE, THE GREAT KEEP COMES CRASHING DOWN IN RUINS...
POHIOLA IS NO MORE.
BUT ITS EVIL WILL LINGER IN MYTH AND FABLE AS LONG AS MEN DO LIVE!
SHALL WE GO HOME NOW, SIRE?
AYE... HOME TO TARANTIA!
I'VE HAD A BELLYFUL OF HUNTING-- AND OF BEING HUNTED.
DEVIL TAKE THESE HYPERBOREAN FOGS! I'VE THE SOUR TASTE OF THEM IN MY THROAT.
I WAS WONDERING, PROSPERO... HAVE YOU ANY MORE OF YOUR GOOD POITANIAN WINE?
AS I RECALL, AFTER THE HUNT, THERE WAS A LITTLE LEFT...!
NEXT MOMENT, CONAN BREAKS OFF, FLUSHING...
FOR, PROSPERO HAS BEGUN TO LAUGH UNTIL THE TEARS ARE POURING DOWN HIS CHEEKS... CUTTING RUNNELS THROUGH THE CAKED AND BLOODIED EARTH...!
HA HA HA HA
NEXT ISSUE: THE BLACK SPHINX OF NEBTHU!
ON SALE IN MARCH!

THE MAKING OF KING CONAN, 1932-1980

by Roy Thomas

Stop me if you've heard this one before. Or rather, just go back and (hopefully) savor "The Witch of the Mists" again. This one's for the newcomers among ye.

Robert E. Howard, creator of Conan, wrote nearly two dozen adventures of the swashbuckling Cimmerian during the 1930's, recording (though in no particular order) the barbarian's slow and checkered rise to kingship.

But, when Conan announced at the end of the novel-length *Conan the Conqueror* (see SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN #10) that he intended to make the Nemedian Harem girl Zenobia his bride and thus the queen of Aquilonia, he was making what amounted to his farewell speech — at least as written by REH himself.

Howard revealed, in letters to friends and fans, that Conan reigned as king for many years, that he fought various "defensive wars," and that he did some exploratory voyaging on the Western Ocean. But that's about it. He never even revealed in so many words if King Conan kept his word about marrying Zenobia — though it's safe to assume he meant what he said.

In the years since Howard's untimely death in 1936, however, several other writers have added to the more-or-less official canon. About a year back, for instance, noted fantasy authors L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter wrote *Conan the Liberator*, a novel which tells how, as they see it, Conan became king of Aquilonia, slaying the evil King Numedides on his throne. And we ourselves, in the 1978 and 1979 CONAN ANNUALS, have told of how Conan retrieved and wedded the lovely Zenobia.

Most importantly for our purposes here, though: In 1957, Björn Nyberg and de Camp wrote a novel eventually known as *Conan the Avenger*, which occurs about a year after Conan's marriage and has the Cimmerian off on a quest to rescue his abducted queen from vile sorcerers and the like. What happened during the next few years is, as of yet, unrecorded.

However, in the late 1970's, de Camp and Carter wrote a series of short stories which dealt with King Conan and his son (also named Conan, but usually called Prince Conn) locked in final battle with the wizardry of Thoth-Amon and his minions. These tales were eventually collected in the paperback volume *Conan of Aquilonia*.

Some months back, it seemed to me the time was ripe to adapt these stories — yet somehow, they didn't seem quite right for SAVAGE SWORD. Stan Lee and Jim Shooter agreed with me that Marvel should begin a new double-size color comic titled KING CONAN — definitely one of the few comic-mags ever to star a mortal hero who's pushing sixty years of age.

We left the de Camp/Carter stories more or less intact, though we opted for leaving King Conan bereft of the graying beard and moustache his prose authors gave him. Artistically-inclined readers may pencil these onto the printed pages, if they wish. And we'll be interested in hearing if you agreed or disagreed with that decision on Ye Editor's part.

Meanwhile, as to where we'll go with KING CONAN #5 and beyond — well, stick around for the next year, and you'll see, okay? Who knows? There may yet be a comic-mag called THE SON OF CONAN!

LIKE TALES OF DARK SORCERY AND SWASH-BUCKLING ACTION? THEN DON'T MISS A SINGLE THRILLING ISSUE OF

CONAN THE BARBARIAN

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THE SAVAGE SWORD of CONAN THE BARBARIAN

ON SALE NOW!

ANOTHER WORLD OF LEGENDARY EXCITEMENT!

AS ONLY ROY THOMAS KEITH POLLARD AND CHIC STONE CAN PRESENT IT!

THE MIGHTY THOR

GOD OF THUNDER!

ON SALE MONTHLY!

COVER PENCILER: JOHN BUSCEMA

COVER INKER: ERNIE CHAN

"Know, O prince, that the man called Conan was all things in his day: a thief, a reaver, a slayer... fierce sellsword and fiercer pirate... and finally, usurper king of proud, civilized Aquilonia, mightiest of Hyborian kingdoms... with his queen Zenobia at his side, and his son Prince Conn ripe to carry on the legend..."

—*The Nemedian Chronicles.*

Stan Lee PRESENTS:

KING CONAN

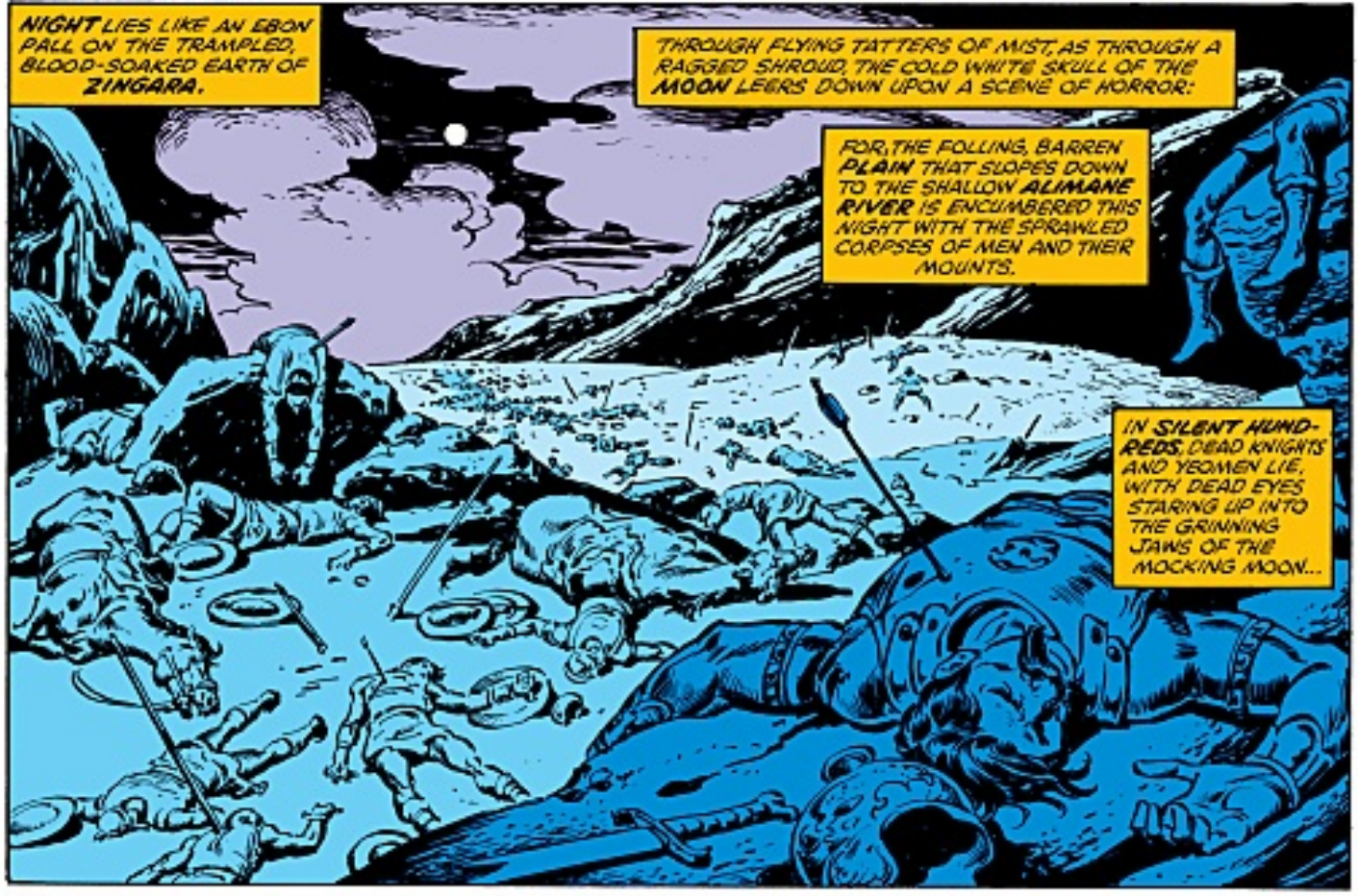
Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By *ROBERT E. HOWARD*

ROY THOMAS
SCRIPTER / EDITOR

* JOHN BUSCEMA & ERNIE CHAN
ILLUSTRATORS

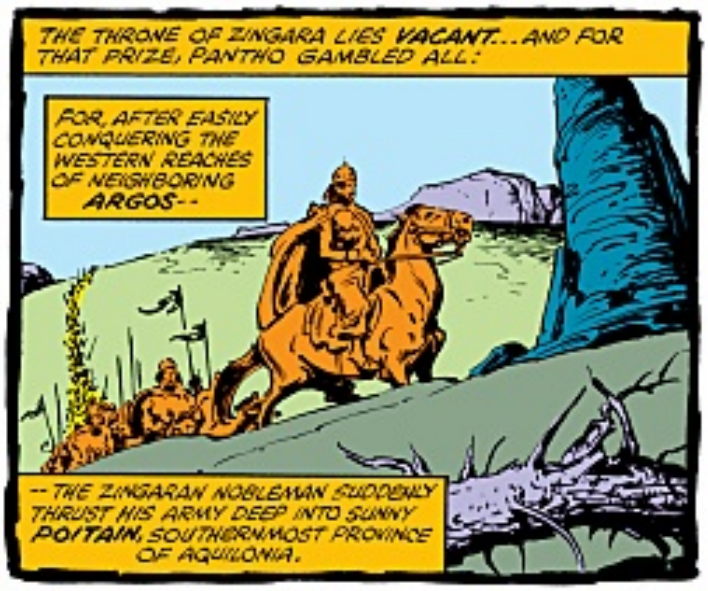
* JOE ROSEN, LETTERER
G. ROUSSOS, COLORIST

* JIM SHOOTER
CONSULTING EDITOR


NIGHT LIES LIKE AN EBON PALL ON THE TRAMPLED, BLOOD-SOAKED EARTH OF ZINGARA.
THROUGH FLYING TATTERS OF MIST, AS THROUGH A RAGGED SHROUD, THE COLD WHITE SKULL OF THE MOON LEERS DOWN UPON A SCENE OF HORROR:
FOR, THE ROLLING, BARREN PLAIN THAT SLOPES DOWN TO THE SHALLOW ALIMANE RIVER IS ENCUMBERED THIS NIGHT WITH THE SPRAWLED CORPSES OF MEN AND THEIR MOUNTS.
IN SILENT HUNDREDS, DEAD KNIGHTS AND YEOMEN LIE, WITH DEAD EYES STARING UP INTO THE GRINNING JAWS OF THE MOCKING MOON...

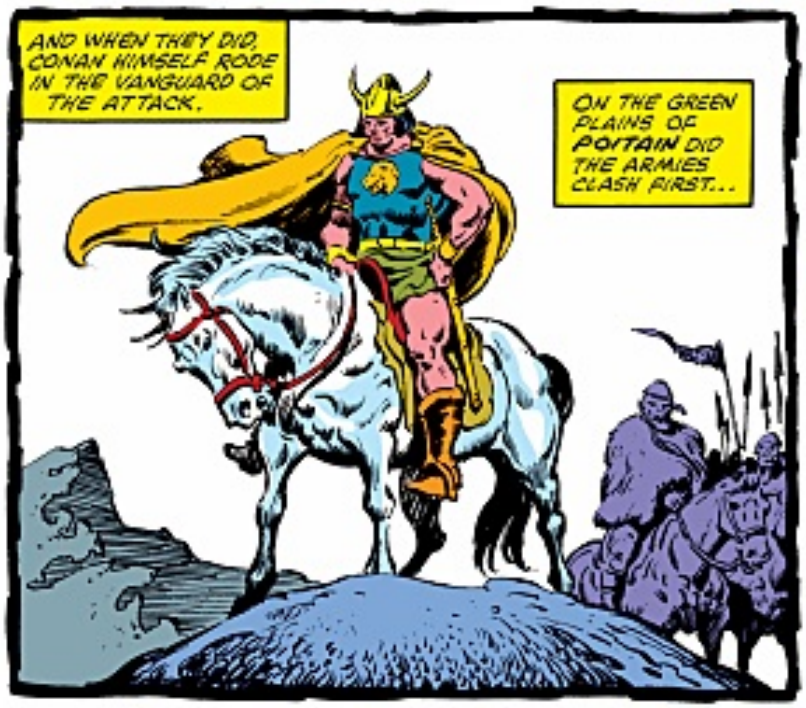
...WHILE THE HIDEOUS MIRTH OF HYENAS RINGS WEIRDLY THROUGH THE STILL AIR.
NOT FOR NAUGHT IS THIS GRIM REGION CALLED... THE PLACE OF SKULLS.

HERE IT IS THAT THE BRIGHT IMPERIAL DREAMS OF PANTHO, DUKE OF GUARRALID, WERE DROWNED IN DARKNESS...
...HIS VAULTING AMBITION DRENCHED IN BLOOD.


THE THRONE OF ZINGARA LIES VACANT... AND FOR THAT PRIZE, PANTHO GAMBLED ALL:
FOR, AFTER EASILY CONQUERING THE WESTERN REACHES OF NEIGHBORING ARGOS--
--THE ZINGARAN NOBLEMAN SUDDENLY THRUST HIS ARMY DEEP INTO SUNNY POITAIN, SOUTHERNMOST PROVINCE OF AQUILONIA.

THE TAVERNS SPOKE WITH ALE-LOOSENED TONGUES:
A DEMON OR A SORCERER HAS TAKEN POSSESSION OF THE DUKE, I TELL YE, TO STRIKE AT POITAIN!
AYE! ALL MEN KNOW THAT THE LEOPARDS OF POITAIN* CROUCH BETWEEN THE PAWS OF THE MIGHTY LION OF AQUILONIA!
*THE LEOPARD BANNER IS THE FLAG OF POITAIN. --ROY.

NOR WAS KING CONAN, MONARCH OF THAT PROUDEST OF HYBORIAN NATIONS, SLOW TO TAKE UP THE HURLED GAUNTLET...
WHY DOES DUKE PANTHO STRIKE AT POITAIN -- WHEN HIS AMBITION MUST BE TO CONQUER ZINGARA ITSELF?
HE MUST MEAN TO SECURE HIS REAR, BEFORE STRIKING FOR KORDAVA.*
WELL, WHATEVER HIS MOTIVES, MY IRON LEGIONS WILL MAKE HIM KNOW HE'S ERRED!
* KORDAVA = CAPITAL OF ZINGARA. -- R. T.

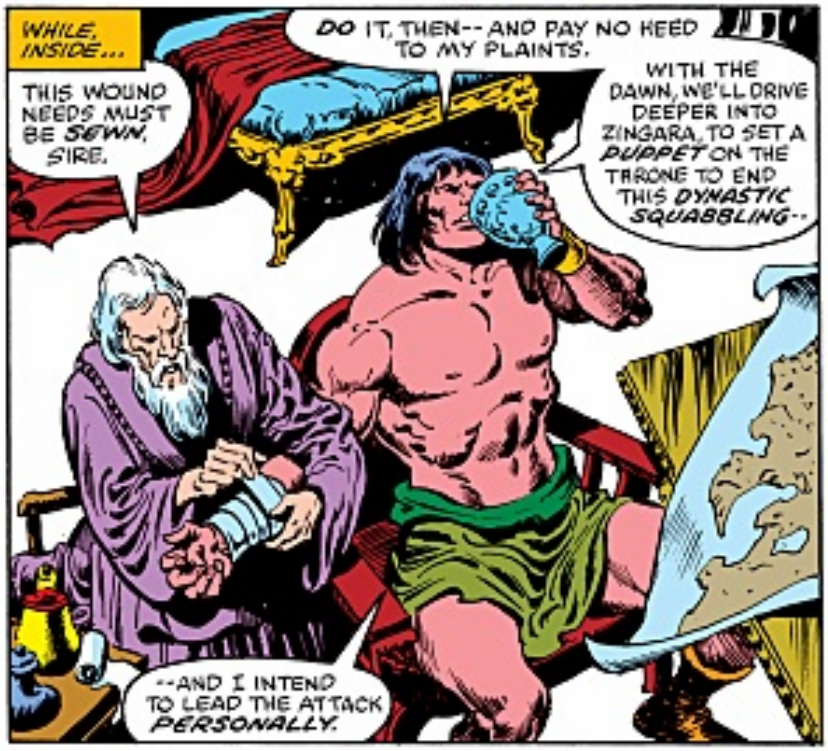

AND WHEN THEY DID, CONAN HIMSELF RODE IN THE VANGUARD OF THE ATTACK.
ON THE GREEN PLAINS OF POITAIN DID THE ARMIES CLASH FIRST...

THE WILD ZINGARAN CHARGE BROKE LIKE THE SURF AGAINST THE STOLID PIKEMEN OF GUNDERLAND, AQUILONIA'S NORTHERN PROVINCE...

...WHILE THE SHAFTS OF CONAN'S BOSSONIAN ARCHERS, FROM HER WESTERN REACHES, MOWED DOWN THE INVADING KNIGHTS.

THEN, AS PANTHO WITHDREW HIS MOUNTED KNIGHTS TO REGROUP, CONAN'S OWN GUARD, THE BLACK DRAGONS, LED THE AQUILONIAN CHARGE...
ON, LADS! LET'S TEACH THE ZINGARAN DOGS WHERE THE BORDERS LIE!

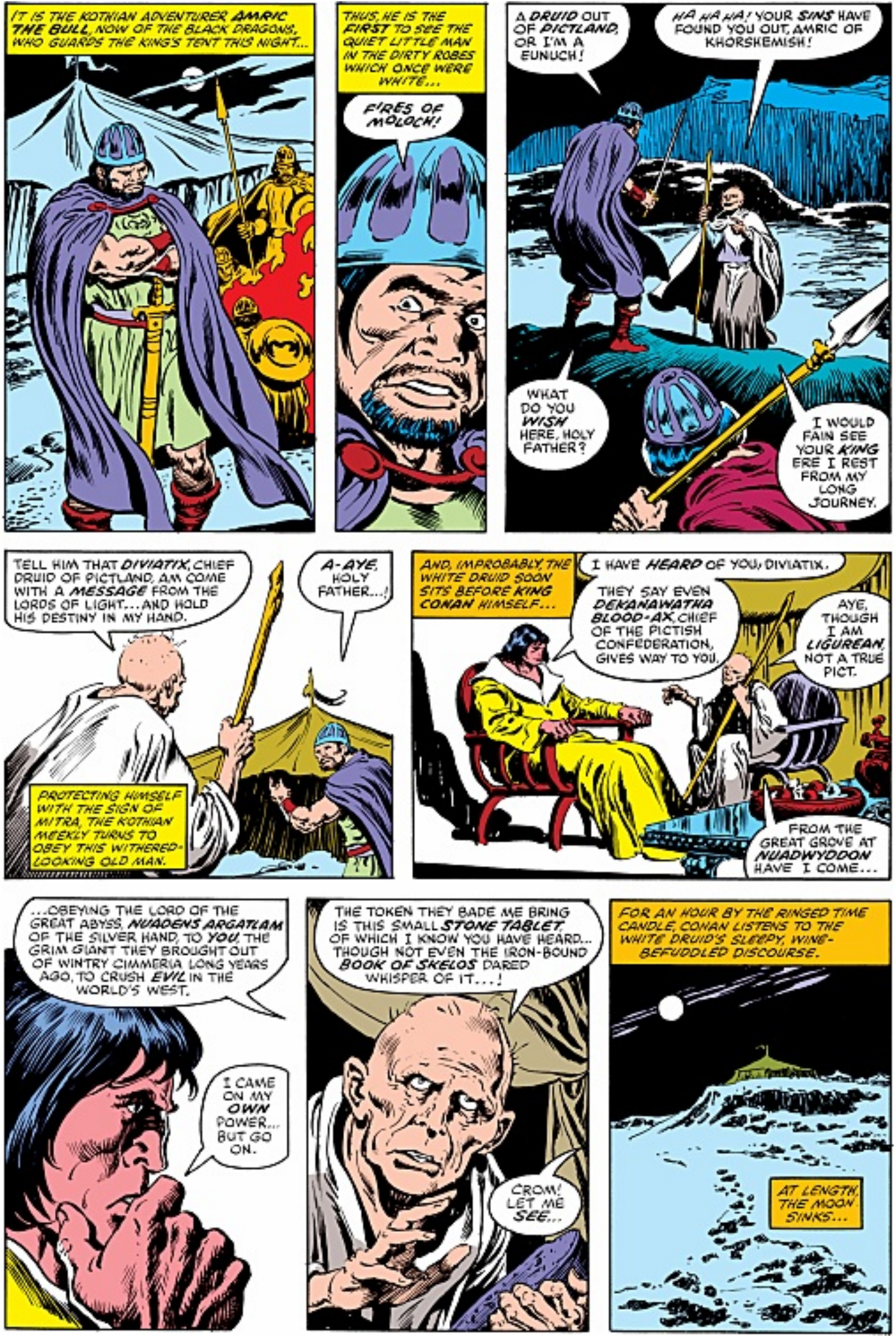
FLEEING BACK ACROSS THE ALIMANE TO THEIR HOMELAND, THE ZINGARANS WERE PURSUED BY A VENGEFUL CONAN...
...WHO CAUGHT UP WITH THE BATTERED, DEFEATED HOST AND CUT IT TO RIBBONS.
MANY ZINGARANS DIED; SOME YIELDED; FEW ESCAPED...AND PANTHO'S DREAM DROWNED IN A CRIMSON SEA.
NOW, THE BANNER OF THE GOLDEN LION FLIES ABOVE A ROYAL TENT ON A KNOLL ABOVE THE DEATH-STREWN BATTLEFIELD...


WHILE, INSIDE...
THIS WOUND NEEDS MUST BE SEWN, SIRE.
DO IT, THEN-- AND PAY NO HEED TO MY PLAINTS.
WITH THE DAWN, WE'LL DRIVE DEEPER INTO ZINGARA, TO SET A PUPPET ON THE THRONE TO END THIS DYNASTIC SQUABBLING--
--AND I INTEND TO LEAD THE ATTACK PERSONALLY.

GENERAL PALLANTIDES-- WHICH IS THE QUICKEST ROUTE FROM HERE TO STYGIA?
THAT ONE, SIRE.
AH, YES! I FOLLOWED IT HERE WHEN I FLED XALTOTUN'S WIZARDRY, SOME FIFTEEN YEARS AGO.*
*AS NARRATED IN OUR ADAPTATION OF THE NOVEL CONAN THE CONQUEROR. --ROY.

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT DUKE PANTHO'S INVASION THAT DOESN'T ADD UP, OLD FRIEND.
ONLY A FOOL OR A MADMAN WOULD HAVE HURLED AN ARMY AGAINST WAR-LIKE POITAIN, EVEN WITHOUT MY LEGIONS TO BACK IT UP.
I AGREE, SIRE, BUT WHAT--?
WE'LL NOT KNOW FROM THE DUKE, SINCE I SPLIT HIS SKULL TODAY--

--BUT I KNEW HIM OF OLD, AND THINK HE WAS NEITHER MAD NOR FOOLISH.
I SUSPECT AN UNSEEN HAND BEHIND PANTHO'S MAD EXPEDITION-- A PLOT OF SOME KIND.
IN FACT, I SMELL... SORCERY.
LEAVE ME NOW. I WOULD THINK FURTHER ON THIS...!

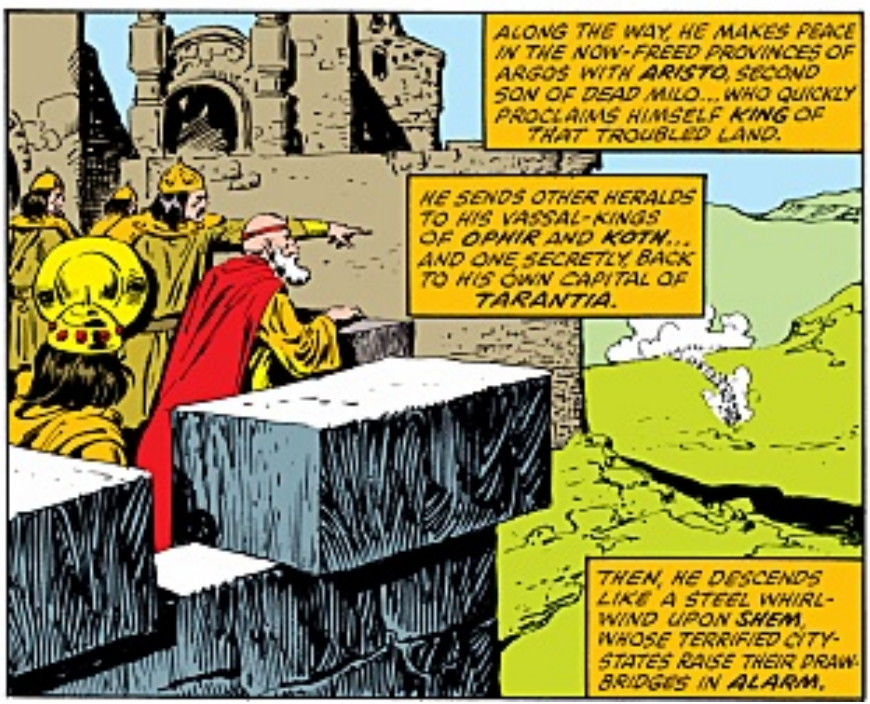

IT IS THE KOTHIAN ADVENTURER AMRIC THE BULL, NOW OF THE BLACK DRAGONS, WHO GUARDS THE KING'S TENT THIS NIGHT...
THUS, HE IS THE FIRST TO SEE THE QUIET LITTLE MAN IN THE DIRTY ROBES WHICH ONCE WERE WHITE...
FIRES OF MOLOCH!
A DRUID OUT OF PICTLAND, OR I'M A EUNUCH!
HA HA HA! YOUR SINS HAVE FOUND YOU OUT, AMRIC OF KHORSHEMISH!
WHAT DO YOU WISH HERE, HOLY FATHER?
I WOULD FAIN SEE YOUR KING ERE I REST FROM MY LONG JOURNEY.
TELL HIM THAT DIVIATIX, CHIEF DRUID OF PICTLAND, AM COME WITH A MESSAGE FROM THE LORDS OF LIGHT... AND HOLD HIS DESTINY IN MY HAND.
A-AYE, HOLY FATHER...!
PROTECTING HIMSELF WITH THE SIGN OF MITRA, THE KOTHIAN MEEKLY TURNS TO OBEY THIS WITHERED-LOOKING OLD MAN.
AND, IMPROBABLY, THE WHITE DRUID SOON SITS BEFORE KING CONAN HIMSELF...
I HAVE HEARD OF YOU, DIVIATIX.
THEY SAY EVEN DEKANAWATHA BLOOD-AX, CHIEF OF THE PICTISH CONFEDERATION, GIVES WAY TO YOU.
AYE, THOUGH I AM LIGUREAN, NOT A TRUE PICT.
FROM THE GREAT GROVE AT NUADWYDDON HAVE I COME...
...OBEYING THE LORD OF THE GREAT ABYSS, NUADENS ARGATLAM OF THE SILVER HAND, TO YOU, THE GRIM GIANT THEY BROUGHT OUT OF WINTRY CIMMERIA LONG YEARS AGO, TO CRUSH EVIL IN THE WORLD'S WEST.
I CAME ON MY OWN POWER... BUT GO ON.
THE TOKEN THEY BADE ME BRING IS THIS SMALL STONE TABLET, OF WHICH I KNOW YOU HAVE HEARD... THOUGH NOT EVEN THE IRON-BOUND BOOK OF SKELOS DARED WHISPER OF IT...!
CROM! LET ME SEE...
FOR AN HOUR BY THE RINGED TIME CANDLE, CONAN LISTENS TO THE WHITE DRUID'S SLEEPY, WINE-BEFUDDLED DISCOURSE.
AT LENGTH, THE MOON SINKS...

AND, AS THE TRUMPETS SING AT DAWN...
PRINCESS CHABELA!* I HEARD YOU AND YOUR CONSORT HAD ARRIVED LAST NIGHT.
AND HOW FARE YOU AND OLIVERO'S ELEVEN CHILDREN?
*SEE SAVAGE SWORD #40-43 FOR PRINCESS CHABELA, SOME TWENTY YEARS YOUNGER. --R.
THEY ARE WELL, CO-- MAJESTY. OLIVERO AND I HAVE COME TO EXPRESS OUR THANKS FOR YOUR PUNISHING OF THE AMBITIOUS PANTHO, AND--OHHH!
SAY NO MORE, DEAREST CHABELA.
IN FACT, I AM GLAD YOU'RE HERE... BOTH OF YOU...!

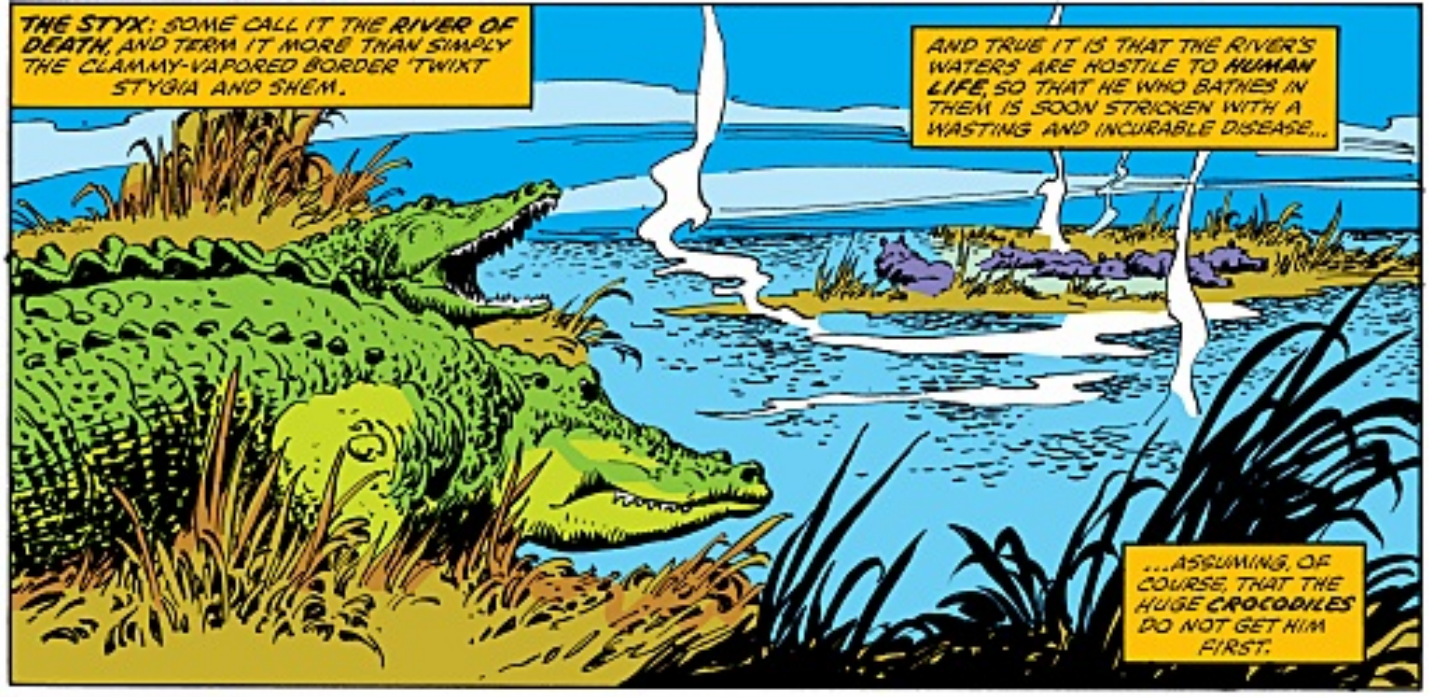
WITHIN TEN MINUTES, CONAN HAS SETTLED THE LONG-VEXING PROBLEM OF THE ZINGARAN ROYAL SUCCESSION...
RISE, OLIVERO! YOU AND CHABELA ARE NOW KING AND QUEEN OF ZINGARA...
...UNDER THE OVER-LORDSHIP OF AQUILONIA, OF COURSE.
OF...COURSE.

THEN, DISPATCHING THE NEW TITULAR MONARCHS TO KORDAVA WITH A TROOP OF AQUILONIAN KNIGHTS TO SEE THE PAIR SAFELY INSTALLED...
...CONAN MOVES SOUTHEAST AT THE HEAD OF SIX THOUSAND HORSES AND FOOT-SOLDIERS.
SOUTHEAST, ACROSS THE ARGOSSEAN BORDER... AND BEYOND THAT, TOWARD STYGIA!

AND WITH THEM COMES AN AGED, SHRIVELED DRUID IN A RATTLING MULE-CART.

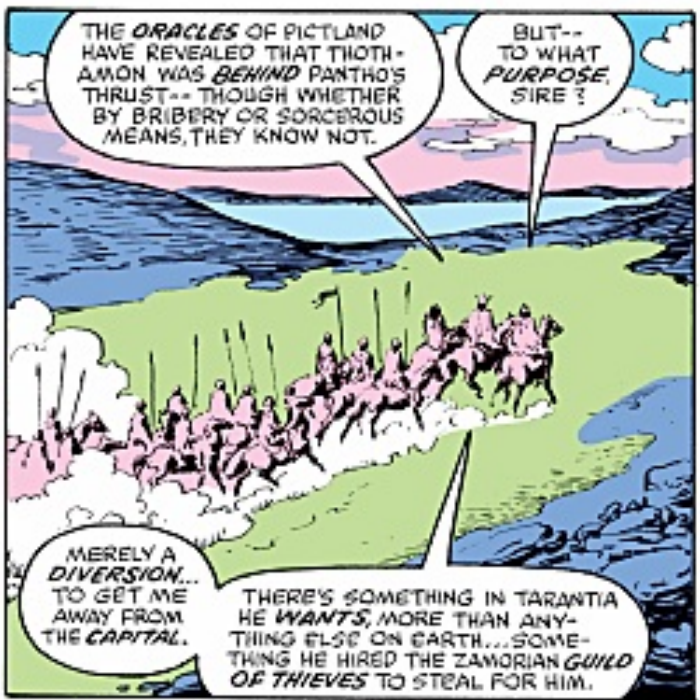

ALONG THE WAY, HE MAKES PEACE IN THE NOW-FREED PROVINCES OF ARGOS WITH ARISTO, SECOND SON OF DEAD MILO... WHO QUICKLY PROCLAIMS HIMSELF KING OF THAT TROUBLED LAND.
HE SENDS OTHER HERALDS TO HIS VASSAL-KINGS OF OPHIR AND KOTH... AND ONE SECRETLY BACK TO HIS OWN CAPITAL OF TARANTIA.
THEN, HE DESCENDS LIKE A STEEL WHIRLWIND UPON SHEM, WHOSE TERRIFIED CITY-STATES RAISE THEIR DRAWBRIDGES IN ALARM.

TROCERO, COUNT OF POITAIN, IS DISPATCHED AHEAD TO PACIFY EACH AGITATED SHEMITISH KINGLET IN TURN...
...GENERALLY WITH GOOD AQUILONIAN SILVER.
LIKEWISE, THE FEW OF HIS SOLDIERS WHO MAKE FREE WITH EITHER SHEMITISH LIVESTOCK OR WENCHES...
...ARE HANGED IN FULL VIEW OF THEIR COMRADES.
AFTER ALL, THE LAST THING CONAN WANTS WHEN HE REACHES THE BORDERS OF STYGIA IS AN ANGRY, UNITED SHEM AT HIS BACK!
THEN, ONE NIGHT, AS THE ARMY CAMPS ON THE NORTHERN SHORES OF THE RIVER STYX, BOUNDARY OF SERPENT-RIDDLED STYGIA...
HO, THE CAMP!
IT IS YOUNG PRINCE CONN, AT THE HEAD OF A TROOP ON LATHERED HORSES.
AND HOW FARES YOUR MOTHER, THE QUEEN, BOY?
WELL, FATHER--THOUGH SHE WAILED LIKE A WOUNDED BUFFALO WHEN SHE HEARD YOU WANTED ME HERE.
HOW LIKE A WOMAN! I REMEMBER MY OWN MOTHER, BACK IN CIMMERIA...
BUT, YOU SHOULDN'T COMPARE YOUR MOTHER TO A BUFFALO, BOY! THAT'S IMPERTINENT.
YES, SIRE.
BUT DO YOU REALLY WANT ME WITH YOU IN BATTLE?
CROM, BOY--YOU'RE THIRTEEN ALREADY!
HOW CAN YOU HOPE TO HOLD THE THRONE WHEN YOU ASCEND TO IT, WITHOUT LEARNING THE ART OF WAR?
DID THE PRIESTS OF MITRA COME WITH YOU, AS I COMMANDED?
AYE, BEARING A LITTLE BOX COVERED WITH STRANGE WRITINGS... THOUGH THEY WOULDN'T TELL ME WHAT WAS IN IT.
DO YOU KNOW, FATHER?
THAT'S WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL OUR... SECRET WEAPON.
NOW, GET A GOOD REPAST AND A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP.
ERE DAWN, WE SHALL CROSS INTO STYGIA!

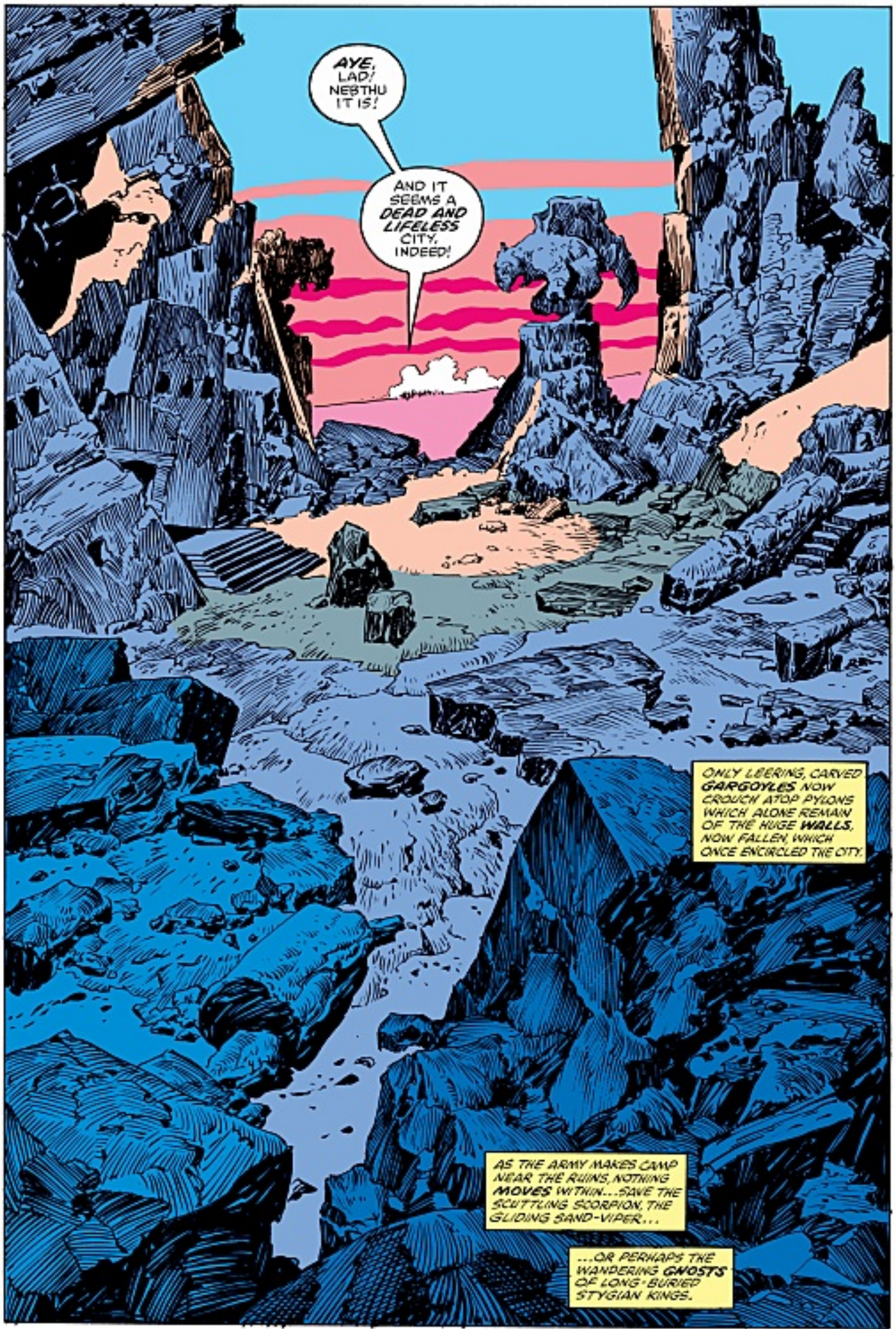

THE STYX: SOME CALL IT THE RIVER OF DEATH, AND TERM IT MORE THAN SIMPLY THE CLAMMY-VAPORED BORDER 'TWIXT STYGIA AND SHEM.
AND TRUE IT IS THAT THE RIVER'S WATERS ARE HOSTILE TO HUMAN LIFE, SO THAT HE WHO BATHES IN THEM IS SOON STRICKEN WITH A WASTING AND INCURABLE DISEASE...
...ASSUMING, OF COURSE, THAT THE HUGE CROCODILES DO NOT GET HIM FIRST.

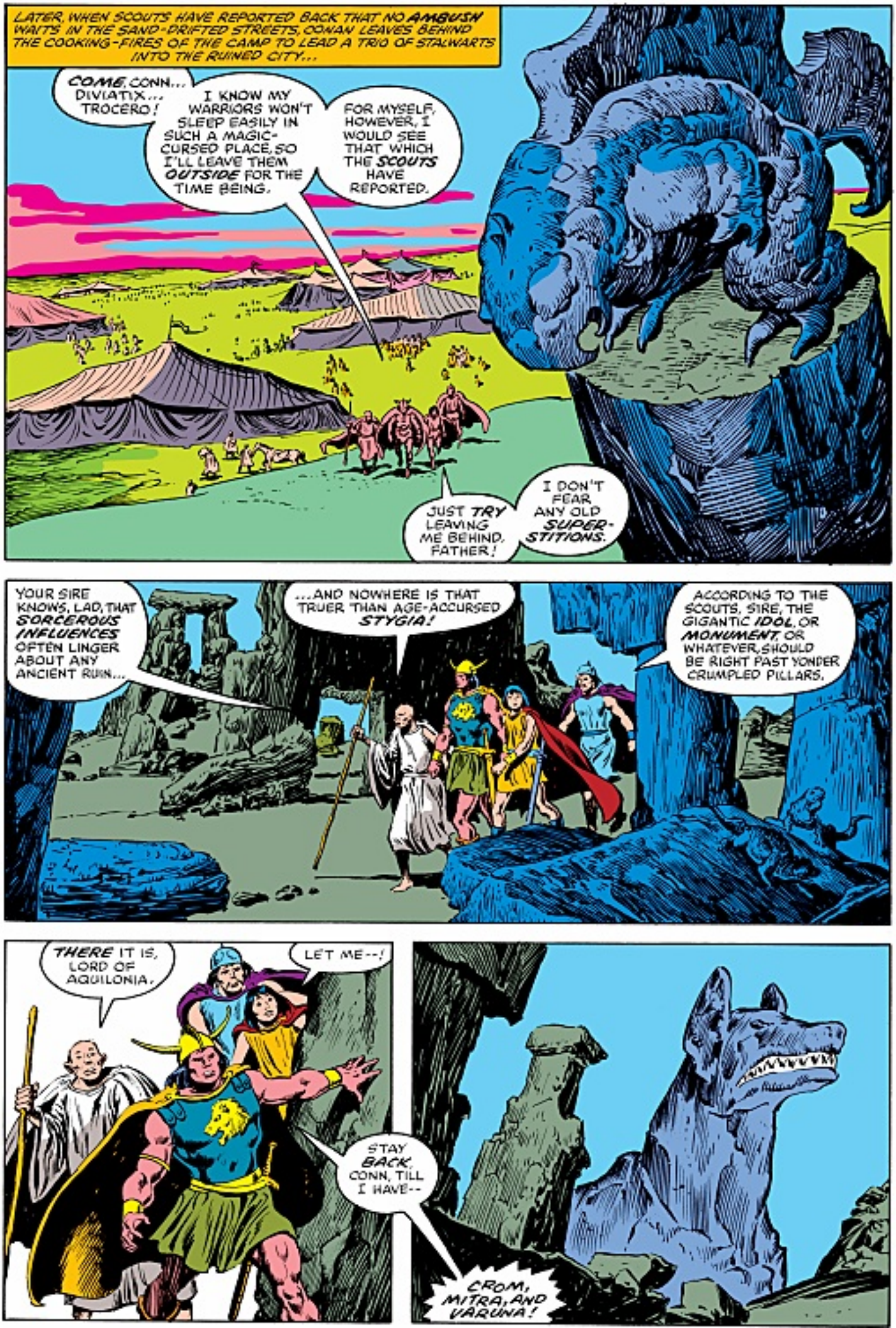
NOW, IN THE HOURS BEFORE DAWN, KING CONAN LEADS THE WAY ACROSS THE FORD OF BUBASTES TO THE LOW, REEDY SHORE BEYOND...
DISTURBANCES IN STYGIA HAVE LED ITS RULERS TO DEPEND UPON MOUNTED PATROLS TO KEEP STRANGERS AT BAY... BUT IT SEEMS NONE OF THEM WILL CHALLENGE US.
WHEN YOU'VE CROSSED, EACH MAN WILL DRY HIMSELF AND HIS MOUNT... FOR SAFETY'S SAKE.
SIRE, I CAN HOLD MY SILENCE NO LONGER. WHY IN MITRA'S NAME ARE WE IN ACCURSED STYGIA?
BECAUSE THIS IS THE LAND OF OUR SECRET ENEMY... THOTH-AMON!
THOTH-AMON!? THAT STYGIAN WIZARD WE FOUGHT IN HYPERBOREA MONTHS AGO?*
*SEE ISSUE # 1. --ROY.

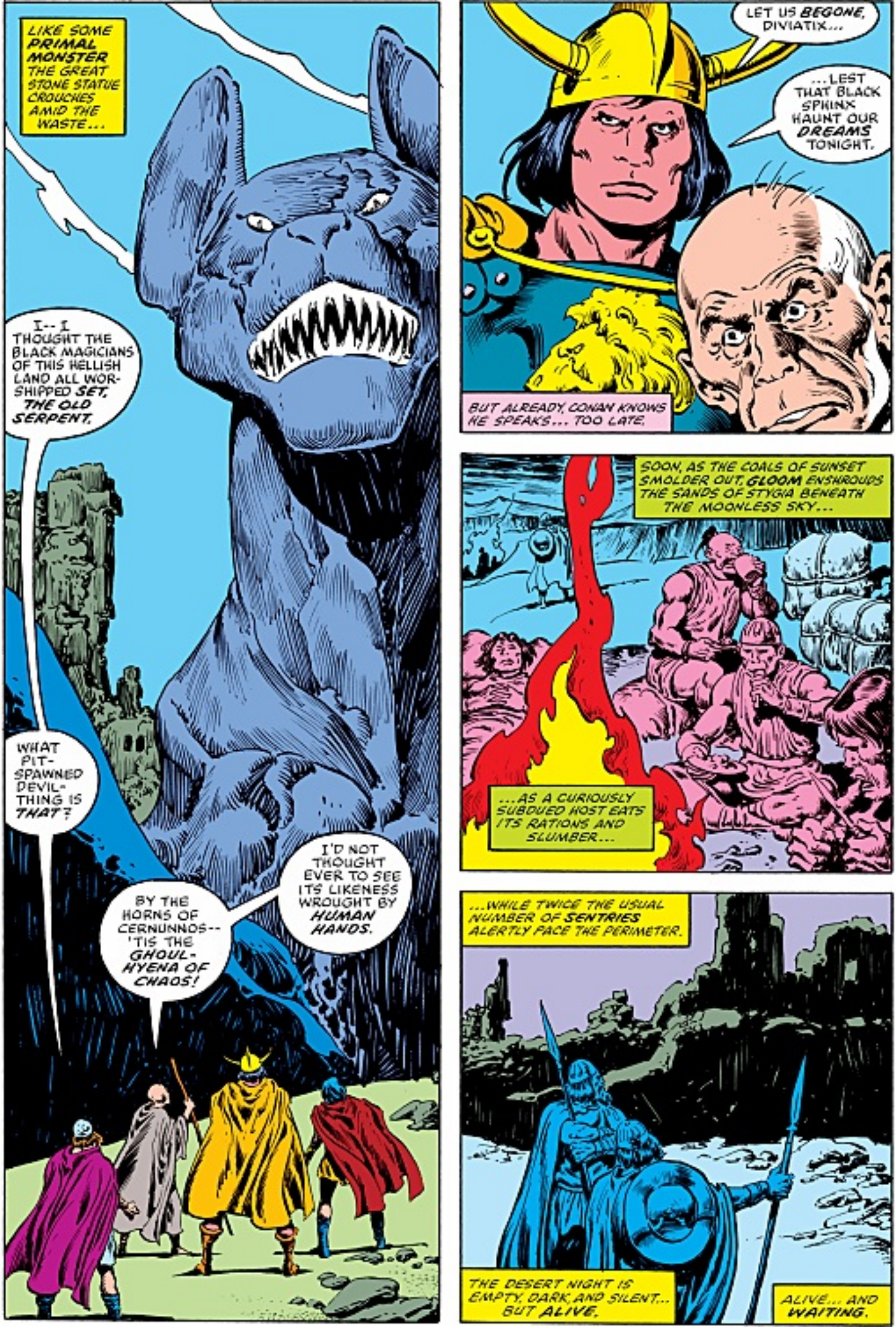
AYE, TROCERO! THERE'S ONLY ONE THOTH-AMON, MY FATHER HAS EVER SAID.
WOULD TO CROM THERE WILL BE NONE, ONE DAY!
THE WHITE DRUID BORE ME WARNING OF HIS SCHEMES.
BUT WHAT HAS ALL THIS TO DO WITH DUKE PANTHO'S ATTACK ON POITAIN?

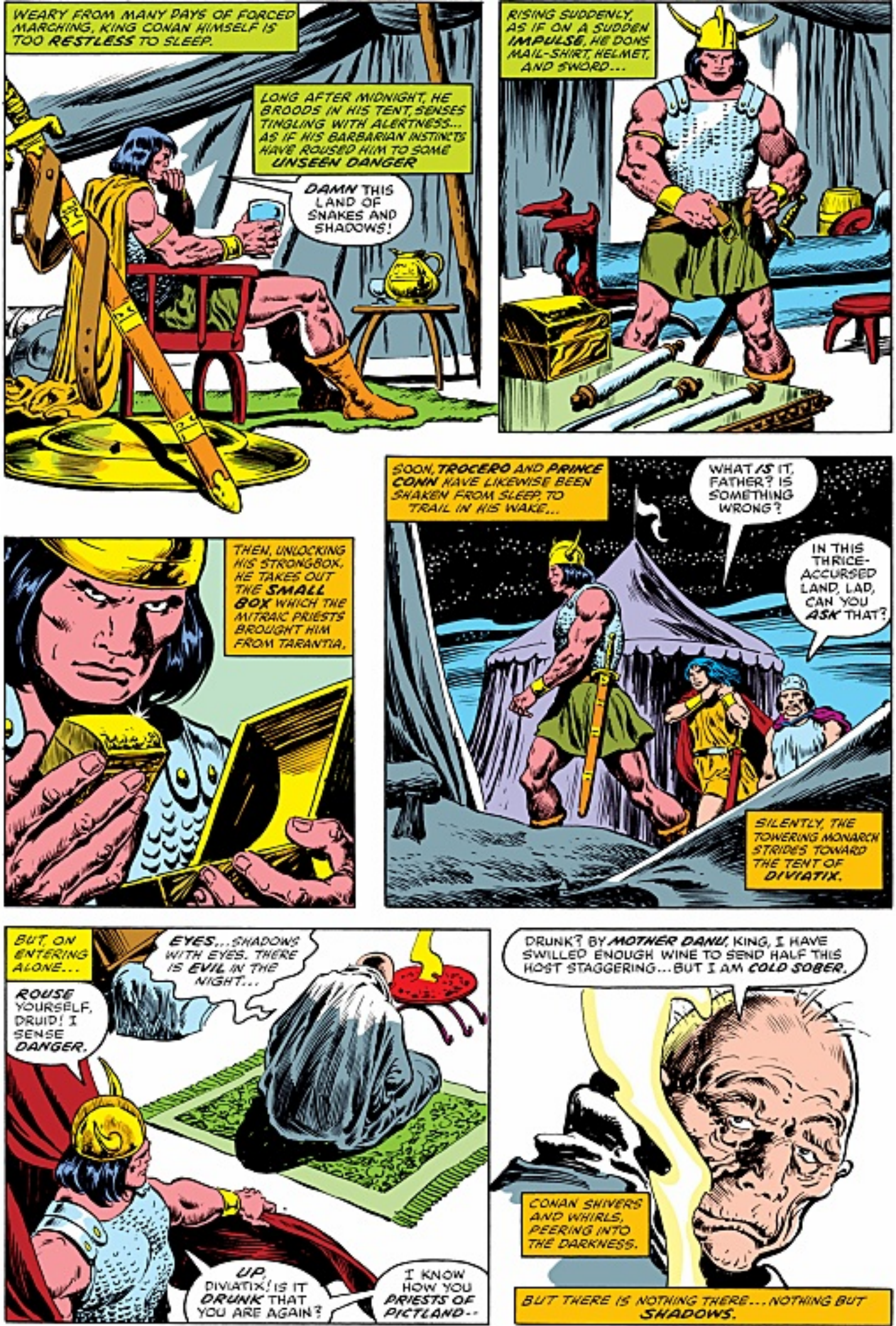

THE ORACLES OF PICTLAND HAVE REVEALED THAT THOTH-AMON WAS BEHIND PANTHO'S THRUST-- THOUGH WHETHER BY BRIBERY OR SORCEROUS MEANS, THEY KNOW NOT.
BUT-- TO WHAT PURPOSE, SIRE?
MERELY A DIVERSION... TO GET ME AWAY FROM THE CAPITAL.
THERE'S SOMETHING IN TARANTIA HE WANTS, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE ON EARTH... SOMETHING HE HIRED THE ZAMORIAN GUILD OF THIEVES TO STEAL FOR HIM.

BUT, THOTH-AMON MISCALCULATED-- NEVER DREAMING I WOULD SMASH PANTHO SO QUICKLY, NOR THAT THE ORACLE OF PICTLAND WOULD WARN ME OF THE PLOT.
HE STILL THINKS ME IN THE NORTH, CHASING THE ZINGARAN OVER HILL AND DALE.
DIVIATIX HAS KEPT OUR DESCENT INTO STYGIA INVISIBLE EVEN TO HIS MAGIC... OR SO HE HOPES.
SIRE-- WHAT IS THIS THING THE STYGIAN MAGE WANTS SO DESPERATELY?
I KNOW, COUNT! IT IS--
O KING! THE MEN ARE READY TO MARCH!
THEN GIVE THE SIGNAL, PALLANTIDES!
AS THE ARMY TURNS SOUTHWARD AND INLAND, A CURSE SEEMS TO OVERHANG THIS ANCIENT LAND... A SUBTLE THING, MOCKING WHISPERS IN AN EERIE WIND, THE HAUNTING SENSATION OF EYES AT THEIR BACKS.
CROSSING THE BAKHR, A SMALL TRIBUTARY OF THE STYX, THEY PASS A STYGIAN VILLAGE...
BUT ITS INHABITANTS ARE MORE INTERESTED IN FLEEING THAN IN WARNING THEIR DISTANT RULERS.
FATHER, I ALWAYS HEARD THAT THOTH-AMON DWELT AT AN OASIS CALLED KHAJAR, FAR WEST OF HERE.
NO MORE, LAD. NOW, HE MAKES HIS LAIR AT NEBTHU.
NEBTHU?
THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE BLACK RING, A WORLD-WIDE GUILD OF EVIL MAGICIANS.
I HEARD OF IT FIRST WHEN I SOUGHT THE MIGHTY TALISMAN CALLED THE HEART OF AHRIMAN IN THIS SINISTER LAND YEARS AGO.*
IS THIS NEBTHU WELL GUARDED, SIRE?
MITRA KNOWS! IT LAY CRUMBLING INTO RUINS, THE LAST I HEARD, BUT I DON'T--
*IN CONAN THE CONQUEROR. -- R.T.
FATHER-- LOOK!
IS THAT-- NEBTHU??


AYE, LAD! NEBTHU IT IS!
AND IT SEEMS A DEAD AND LIFELESS CITY, INDEED!
ONLY LEERING, CARVED GARGOYLES NOW CROUCH ATOP PYLONS WHICH ALONE REMAIN OF THE HUGE WALLS, NOW FALLEN, WHICH ONCE ENCIRCLED THE CITY.
AS THE ARMY MAKES CAMP NEAR THE RUINS, NOTHING MOVES WITHIN...SAVE THE SCUTTLING SCORPION, THE GLIDING SAND-VIPER...
...OR PERHAPS THE WANDERING GHOSTS OF LONG-BURIED STYGIAN KINGS.


LATER, WHEN SCOUTS HAVE REPORTED BACK THAT NO AMBUSH WAITS IN THE SAND-DRIFTED STREETS, CONAN LEAVES BEHIND THE COOKING-FIRES OF THE CAMP TO LEAD A TRIO OF STALWARTS INTO THE RUINED CITY...
COME, CONN... DIVIATIX... TROCERO!
I KNOW MY WARRIORS WON'T SLEEP EASILY IN SUCH A MAGIC-CURSED PLACE, SO I'LL LEAVE THEM OUTSIDE FOR THE TIME BEING.
FOR MYSELF, HOWEVER, I WOULD SEE THAT WHICH THE SCOUTS HAVE REPORTED.
JUST TRY LEAVING ME BEHIND, FATHER!
I DON'T FEAR ANY OLD SUPER-STITIONS.
YOUR SIRE KNOWS, LAD, THAT SORCEROUS INFLUENCES OFTEN LINGER ABOUT ANY ANCIENT RUIN...
...AND NOWHERE IS THAT TRUER THAN AGE-ACCURSED STYGIA!
ACCORDING TO THE SCOUTS, SIRE, THE GIGANTIC IDOL, OR MONUMENT, OR WHATEVER, SHOULD BE RIGHT PAST YONDER CRUMPLED PILLARS.
THERE IT IS, LORD OF AQUILONIA.
LET ME--!
STAY BACK, CONN, TILL I HAVE--
CROM, MITRA, AND VARUNA!


LIKE SOME PRIMAL MONSTER THE GREAT STONE STATUE CROUCHES AMID THE WASTE...
I-- I THOUGHT THE BLACK MAGICIANS OF THIS HELLISH LAND ALL WORSHIPPED SET, THE OLD SERPENT.
WHAT PIT-SPAWNED DEVIL-THING IS THAT?
BY THE HORNS OF CERNUNNOS-- 'TIS THE GHOUL-HYENA OF CHAOS!
I'D NOT THOUGHT EVER TO SEE ITS LIKENESS WROUGHT BY HUMAN HANDS.
LET US BEGONE, DIVIATIX...
...LEST THAT BLACK SPHINX HAUNT OUR DREAMS TONIGHT.
BUT ALREADY, CONAN KNOWS HE SPEAKS... TOO LATE.
SOON, AS THE COALS OF SUNSET SMOLDER OUT, GLOOM ENSHROUDS THE SANDS OF STYGIA BENEATH THE MOONLESS SKY...
...AS A CURIOUSLY SUBDUED HOST EATS ITS RATIONS AND SLUMBER...
...WHILE TWICE THE USUAL NUMBER OF SENTRIES ALERTLY PACE THE PERIMETER.
THE DESERT NIGHT IS EMPTY, DARK, AND SILENT... BUT ALIVE.
ALIVE... AND WAITING.


WEARY FROM MANY DAYS OF FORCED MARCHING, KING CONAN HIMSELF IS TOO RESTLESS TO SLEEP.
LONG AFTER MIDNIGHT, HE BROODS IN HIS TENT, SENSES TINGLING WITH ALERTNESS... AS IF HIS BARBARIAN INSTINCTS HAVE ROUSED HIM TO SOME UNSEEN DANGER
DAMN THIS LAND OF SNAKES AND SHADOWS!
RISING SUDDENLY, AS IF ON A SUDDEN IMPULSE, HE DONS MAIL-SHIRT, HELMET, AND SWORD...
THEN, UNLOCKING HIS STRONGBOX, HE TAKES OUT THE SMALL BOX WHICH THE MITRAIC PRIESTS BROUGHT HIM FROM TARANTIA.
SOON, TROCERO AND PRINCE CONN HAVE LIKEWISE BEEN SHAKEN FROM SLEEP, TO TRAIL IN HIS WAKE...
WHAT IS IT, FATHER? IS SOMETHING WRONG?
IN THIS THRICE-ACCURSED LAND, LAD, CAN YOU ASK THAT?
SILENTLY, THE TOWERING MONARCH STRIDES TOWARD THE TENT OF DIVIATIX.
BUT, ON ENTERING ALONE...
EYES... SHADOWS WITH EYES. THERE IS EVIL IN THE NIGHT...
ROUSE YOURSELF, DRUID! I SENSE DANGER.
UP, DIVIATIX! IS IT DRUNK THAT YOU ARE AGAIN?
I KNOW HOW YOU PRIESTS OF PICTLAND--
DRUNK? BY MOTHER DANU, KING, I HAVE SWILLED ENOUGH WINE TO SEND HALF THIS HOST STAGGERING... BUT I AM COLD SOBER.
CONAN SHIVERS AND WHIRLS, PEERING INTO THE DARKNESS.
BUT THERE IS NOTHING THERE... NOTHING BUT SHADOWS.

OUTSIDE IN THE DIM, STAR-FILLED NIGHT, PALLANTIDES HAS JOINED THE WAITING THREESOME...
WHAT IS IT, SIRE?
I KNOW NOT... BUT SOMETHING.
CROM CURSE IT, I CAN'T PUT A NAME TO IT, BUT SOMETHING'S WRONG.
NOT YET. LET THE MEN GET WHAT SLEEP THEY MAY, EXCEPT...
PALLANTIDES, LEND ME TWO STOUT MEN-AT-ARMS WHO FEAR NEITHER GOD, MAN, NOR DEVIL!
SHALL WE ROUSE THE HOST, SIRE?

WITHIN MINUTES, A PAIR OF YAWNING GUNDERMEN APPROACH WITH A CLINK OF MAIL...
YOU'LL DO. COME!

STRIDING DOWN THE SANDY LANE BETWEEN ROWS OF TENTS AND OUT TOWARD THE EDGE OF THE ENCAMPMENT, THE GROUP ENCOUNTER AMRIC THE BULL...
HO, MY BRAVE KOTHIAN! HAVE YOU SEEN ANYTHING AMISS?
NOTHING AT ALL, LORD KING, THOUGH WE'VE HEARD THE FAR-OFF YAPPING OF JACKALS.
ALSO, A FEW OF THE SENTRIES COMPLAIN OF... WELL, SHADOWS! SHADOWS THAT WATCH THEM.
SHADOWS WITH EYES! THEN MY VISION WAS TRUE!

SHADOWS, EH? THEY'LL BE STARTING AT MICE NEXT.
WELL, THESE LORDS AND I WILL SEE IF WE CAN FIND YOUR PROWLING SENTRIES, AMRIC.
YOU MAY GO.

AND NOT LONG AFTER...
FATHER-- THERE!
FOOTPRINTS! IT SEEMS WE HAVE A SPY, AFTER ALL!
FOR NEVER YET HAVE I HEARD TELL OF SHADOWS THAT LEAVE FOOTPRINTS IN SOFT SAND.
SIRE, SHALL I SOUND THE HORN?

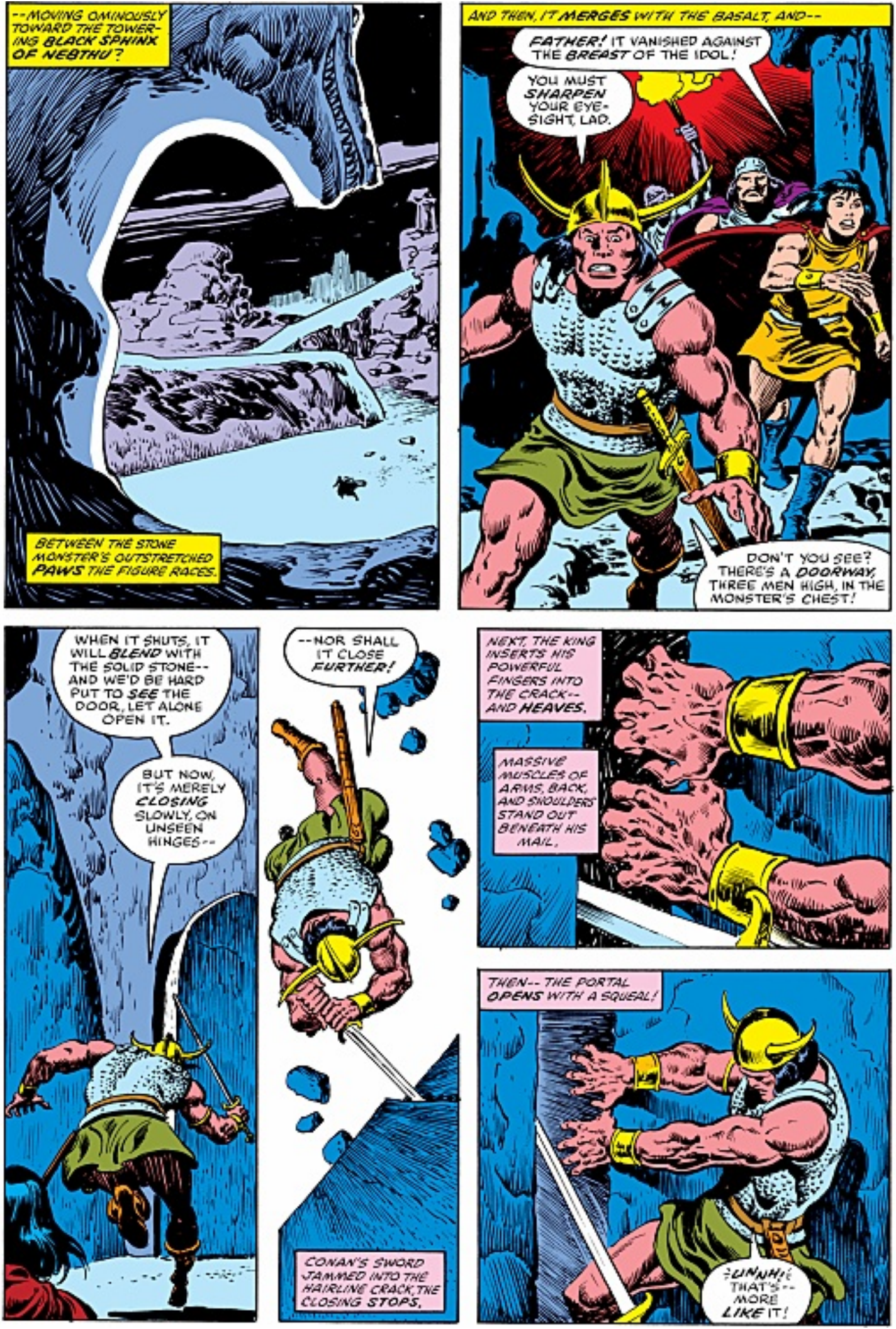
FOR ONE SKULKING SPY? NONSENSE, MAN?
WE'LL TRACK THE ROGUE TO HIS LAIR OURSELVES.
ONE OF YOU GUNDERMEN-- GO TELL PALLANTIDES WHERE WE'VE GONE, AND BID HIM SEND SOME MEN ON OUR TRACK!
BUT TELL HIM THAT THEY SHALL NOT COME UP WITH US, UNLESS WE GET INTO TROUBLE.

I HOPE TO CATCH THE SLINKER UNAWARES... AND THEIR CLATTER WOULD ALERT HIM A LEAGUE AWAY.
TIME ENOUGH TO SUMMON THE WATCH IF WE STUMBLE UPON A NEST OF THOTH-AMON'S SNAKE-WORSHIPPERS!

WITHOUT ANOTHER WORD, THE CIMMERIAN-BORN SOVEREIGN PLUNGES OFF IN THE DIRECTION WHERE THE FOOTPRINTS LEAD.
SOON, THE TRACK HAS LED THEM OVER THE DUNE AND BEYOND SIGHT OF THE CAMP.

COUNT TROCERO FEARS THE LONG MARCH WITHOUT OPPOSITION HAS MADE HIS MONARCH BOTH RESTLESS AND RECKLESS...
BUT, WHO CAN ARGUE WITH KING CONAN OF AQUILONIA?

THEN--
SIRE-- LOOK THERE!
I SEE HIM, TROCERO.
OR DOES HE?
IS IT A BLUR OF STRAINED EYES-- A TRICK OF SHADOWS-- OR DOES HE GLIMPSE A FORM, HOODED AND CLOAKED ALL IN BLACK, FLITTING BEFORE THEM--


--MOVING OMINOUSLY TOWARD THE TOWERING BLACK SPHINX OF NEBTHU?
BETWEEN THE STONE MONSTER'S OUTSTRETCHED PAWS THE FIGURE RACES.
AND THEN, IT MERGES WITH THE BASALT, AND--
FATHER! IT VANISHED AGAINST THE BREAST OF THE IDOL!
YOU MUST SHARPEN YOUR EYESIGHT, LAD.
DON'T YOU SEE? THERE'S A DOORWAY, THREE MEN HIGH, IN THE MONSTER'S CHEST!
WHEN IT SHUTS, IT WILL BLEND WITH THE SOLID STONE--AND WE'D BE HARD PUT TO SEE THE DOOR, LET ALONE OPEN IT.
BUT NOW, IT'S MERELY CLOSING SLOWLY, ON UNSEEN HINGES--
--NOR SHALL IT CLOSE FURTHER!
CONAN'S SWORD JAMMED INTO THE HAIRLINE CRACK, THE CLOSING STOPS.
NEXT, THE KING INSERTS HIS POWERFUL FINGERS INTO THE CRACK--AND HEAVES.
MASSIVE MUSCLES OF ARMS, BACK, AND SHOULDERS STAND OUT BENEATH HIS MAIL.
THEN-- THE PORTAL OPENS WITH A SQUEAL!
UNNH! THAT'S-- MORE LIKE IT!

NOW-- IF ONLY I CAN HOLD THE STONE DOOR--TILL EITHER ITS HINGES GIVE--
--OR ELSE-- IT CRUSHES ME-- TO A CRIMSON PULP--!
SIRE! THE PORTAL HAS CEASED ITS GRINDING!

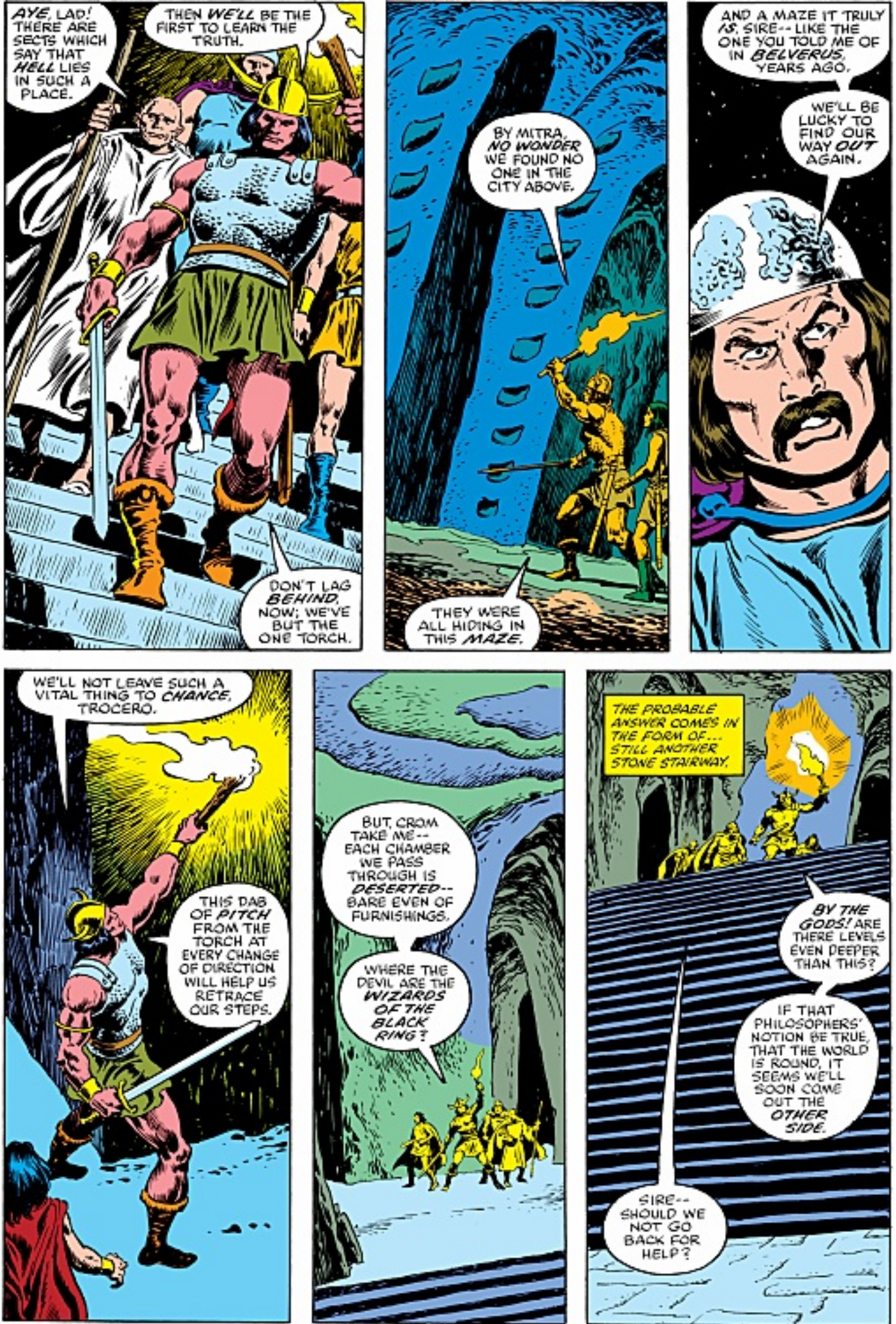
BUT, HOW DID YOU KNOW IT OPERATED ON SOME SORT OF MECHANISM THAT WOULD BREAK WHEN STRONGLY ENOUGH RESISTED?
I DIDN'T.
NOW COME...

YOU, GUNDERMAN-- THORUS, ISN'T IT?-- PLANT YOUR PIKE TO HOLD THE DOOR OPEN, THEN RUN BACK TO CAMP!
TELL PALLANTIDES TO SEND A WHOLE COMPANY AFTER US!...

WE'LL NEED THEM!
YES, YOUR MAJESTY.

WITHIN THE SPHINX, THE FOUR STALWARTS FOLLOW A HIGH, WIDE CORRIDOR OF SOLID STONE... WARY EVERY PASSING INSTANT OF TRAPS AND PITFALLS.
DIVIATIX... YOU HESITATED BEFORE ENTERING THE SPHINX. WHY?
THE OLD SUPERSTITIONS DIE HARD, KING--EVEN IN ONE WHO OFT HAS GLIMPSED THE NAKED SOURCE OF LEGENDS.
FOR UNTOLD AGES, IT HAS BEEN FORBIDDEN TO CARVE THE LIKENESS OF THE GHOUL-HYENA, YET THOTH-AMON AND HIS BLACK RING HAVE--

HOLD, DRUID! WATCH YOUR STEP, ALL!
FROM HERE, A BROAD STONE STAIRWAY DESCENDS.
LEADING-- BENEATH THE DESERT SANDS, FATHER?


AYE, LAD! THERE ARE SECTS WHICH SAY THAT HELL LIES IN SUCH A PLACE.
THEN WE'LL BE THE FIRST TO LEARN THE TRUTH.
DON'T LAG BEHIND, NOW; WE'VE BUT THE ONE TORCH.
BY MITRA, NO WONDER WE FOUND NO ONE IN THE CITY ABOVE.
THEY WERE ALL HIDING IN THIS MAZE.
AND A MAZE IT TRULY IS, SIRE-- LIKE THE ONE YOU TOLD ME OF IN BELVERUS, YEARS AGO.
WE'LL BE LUCKY TO FIND OUR WAY OUT AGAIN.
WE'LL NOT LEAVE SUCH A VITAL THING TO CHANCE, TROCERO.
THIS DAB OF PITCH FROM THE TORCH AT EVERY CHANGE OF DIRECTION WILL HELP US RETRACE OUR STEPS.
BUT, CROM TAKE ME-- EACH CHAMBER WE PASS THROUGH IS DESERTED-- BARE EVEN OF FURNISHINGS.
WHERE THE DEVIL ARE THE WIZARDS OF THE BLACK RING?
THE PROBABLE ANSWER COMES IN THE FORM OF... STILL ANOTHER STONE STAIRWAY.
BY THE GODS! ARE THERE LEVELS EVEN DEEPER THAN THIS?
IF THAT PHILOSOPHERS' NOTION BE TRUE, THAT THE WORLD IS ROUND, IT SEEMS WE'LL SOON COME OUT THE OTHER SIDE.
SIRE-- SHOULD WE NOT GO BACK FOR HELP?

NAY. THE LADS SHOULD BE JOINING US SOON... AND THUS FAR WE'VE FOUND NAUGHT TO BEWARE OF.
HAH! WE'RE ENTERING A CHAMBER HUGE AS AN ARENA, NOT UNLIKE THE GREAT HIPPODROME OF TARANTIA.
SAVE THAT OURS IS OUT IN THE CLEAN OPEN AIR!
STONE BENCHES, TOO... FAR AS I CAN SEE!
I WONDER WHAT THEY USE THIS PLACE FOR.
WE USE IT.. TO DISPOSE OF OUR ENEMIES!
WHAT IN MITRA'S NAME--?
EVEN AS CONAN WHIRLS, COLD ARTIFICIAL LIGHT FLARES UP FILLING THE VAST AREA WITH AN UNCANNY AND SOURCELESS ILLUMINATION.
BY THIS GLOW, THE CIMMERIAN CAN SEE THAT THE FARTHER STONE BENCHES ARE OCCUPIED BY HUNDREDS OF HUMAN FIGURES, ROBED AND COWLED IN BLACK.
AND, DIRECTLY BEFORE THEM, ENTHRONED IN A GREAT CHAIR OF BLACK STONE ABOVE THE LOWER ROWS OF MAGICIANS, SITS A TALL, STRONGLY-BUILT FIGURE WITH THE DARK EYES AND HAWKLIKE FEATURES OF A PURE-BLOODED STYGIAN.
WELCOME TO MY EMPIRE, CONAN OF AQUILONIA!
THOTH-AMON!

CHAPTER II

THE BLACK BEAST SLAYS!

THOTH-AMON CONTINUES: "ATOP THE HILLOCKS OF SAND, OTHER STYGIAN SOLDIERY APPEAR, SHOOTING *FIRE ARROWS* INTO THE CAMP.

"THE MISSILES TEAR COMETLIKE PATHS THROUGH THE DARK.

"FIRST ONE TENT, THEN ANOTHER *BLAZES UP.*

"YOUR GENERAL *PALLANTIDES*, NATURALLY, STRIVES TO RALLY YOUR STARTLED, CONFUSED FORCES...

STRIKE THE TENTS! *PUT OUT THE FIRES!*

CENWULF! WHERE IN HELL ARE YOU?

HERE, MY GENERAL! WHERE IS THE *KING*?

MITRA ONLY KNOWS! HE WENT OFF INTO THE DESERT, TRACKING A SPY.

SPREAD YOUR MEN AROUND THE PERIMETER AND *PICK OFF* SOME OF THOSE FLITTING BLACK-CLOAKS!

DETAIL A SQUAD TO BEAT DOWN THOSE DEVILS ON THE *DUNE* WITH THE FIRE ARROWS!

YES, MY GENERAL.

AMRIC!

HERE, SIRE!

SPREAD THE MEN AROUND IN A *CIRCLE* OUTSIDE THE BOSSONIAN ARCHERS, KNEELING WITH PIKES READY TO STOP A *CHARGE!*

PILE *BAGGAGE* BEFORE THEM, AND HEAP SAND UPON IT FOR A *BREASTWORK..!*

"TAKEN ALL IN ALL, IT IS A *VALIANT* DEFENSE, I SUPPOSE... THOUGH WHO CAN TRULY SAY IF THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO SERVE AQUILONIA ARE ALREADY INSCRIBED IN THE *BOOK OF DEVILS?*

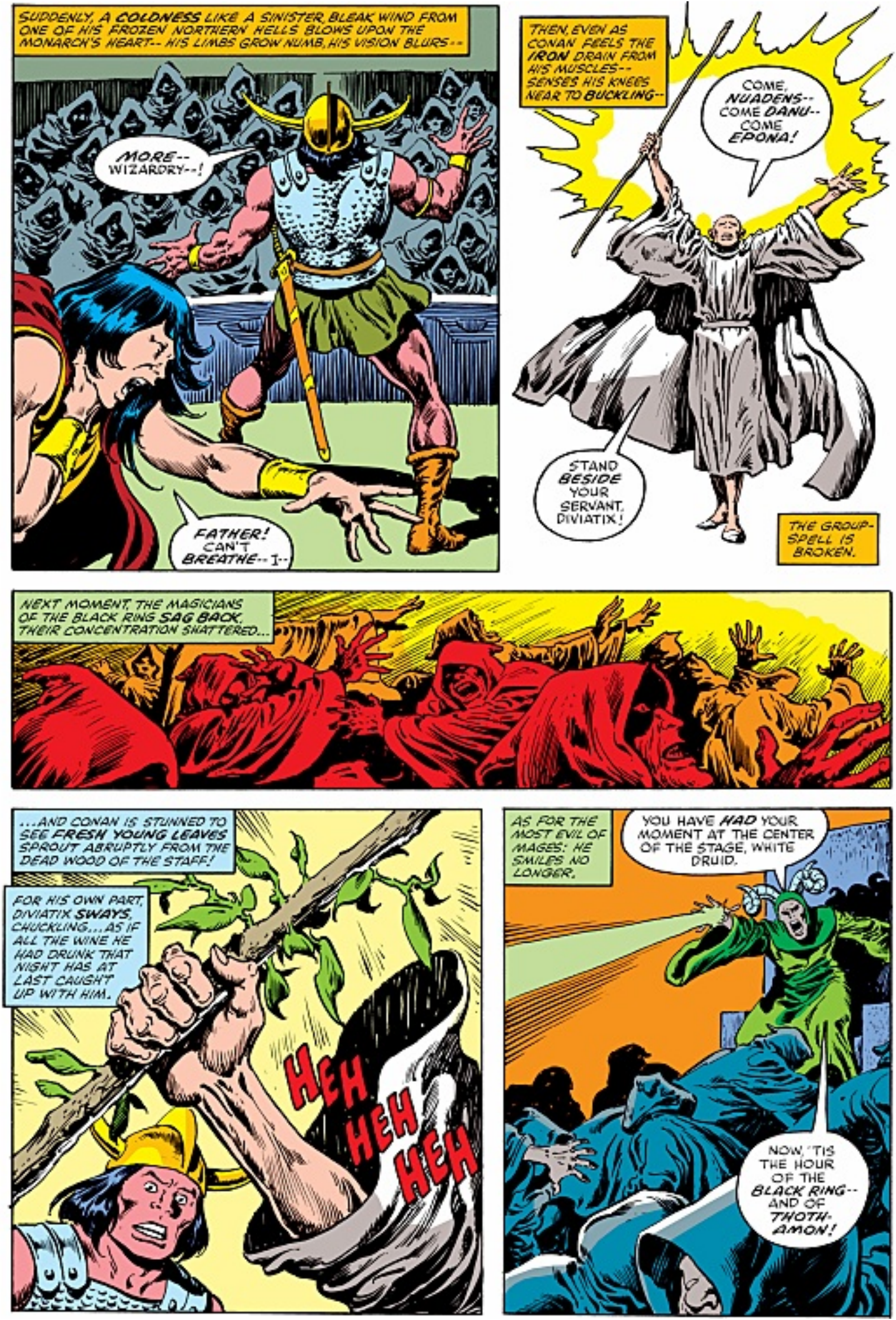
"*I* COULD, PERHAPS... BUT I SHALL NOT.

FOR TOO LONG, CIMMERIAN, HAVE YOU STOOD IN MY PATH!
I SAW YOU VENTURE INTO THE SOUTHERN LANDS FROM YOUR FROZEN NORTH, SOME FORTY YEARS AGO.
I SHOULD HAVE CRUSHED YOU THEN, WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG AND WEAK.
HAD I BUT KNOWN HOW YOUR POWER WOULD GROW, I WOULD HAVE STRUCK YOU DOWN WITH A BLAST OF MAGIC--THAT FIRST TIME, WHEN YOU MEDDLED IN MY AFFAIRS IN THE HOUSE OF KALLIAN IN NEMEDIA...
...OR AGAIN, WHEN YOU SPOILED MY SCHEMES TO WREST THE THRONE OF ZINGARA FROM KING FERDRUGO'S FEEBLE GRASP.
GO ON, STYGIAN.
CROM KNOWS, YOU'VE WAITED LONG ENOUGH TO MAKE THIS SPEECH.
SO I HAVE, BARBARIAN... SO I HAVE.
THERE WERE OTHER OPPORTUNITIES, AS WELL... FOR INSTANCE, WHEN I FIRST GLIMPSED YOU IN COUNT VALENSO'S STRONGHOLD ON THE WESTERN OCEAN...
...OR EVEN IN YOUR EARLIER YEARS OF KINGING IT IN AQUILONIA, WHEN I WAS ASCALANTE'S SLAVE IN TARANTIA.
THESE LAPSES, HOWEVER, SHALL NOW BE CORRECTED.
I FEAR YOUR SLINKING SERPENTS LITTLE, YOU STYGIAN SWINE!
WELL SAID, DOG OF A NORTHLANDER SAVAGE!
I ADMIRE YOUR COOLNESS AS MUCH AS MY FELLOW SORCERERS DEPLORE YOUR EFFRONTERY.
YOU WASTE WORDS, THOTH-AMON.
DESPITE YOUR SURPRISE ATTACK, I SUSPECT MY WARRIORS ABOVE ARE REAPING A RED HARVEST.
AH, BUT I DO NOT FIGHT WITH SWORDS ALONE, CONAN OF AQUILONIA...
...BUT WITH SORCERY AS WELL!

LANCING ACROSS THE ARENA, THE BOLT OF EMERALD STRIKES TROCERO'S NAKED BLADE...
MOTHER OF MITRA!
...SO THAT IT GLOWS RED, AND FALLS SMOKING FROM THE POITAINIAN'S HAND!
AND HE CAN BUT PUT HIS BLISTERED FINGERS IN HIS MOUTH, TO SOOTHE HIS PAIN.

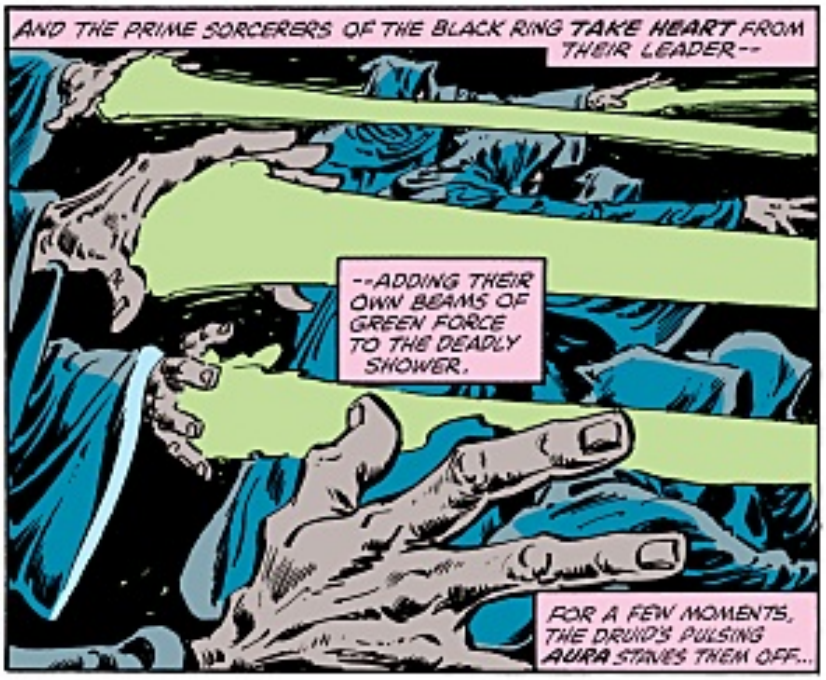
AH YES-- SORCERY! I'VE ALWAYS LOATHED IT... STILL DO.
BUT SOMETIMES, THE ONLY WAY TO FIGHT SORCERY...
...IS WITH SORCERY.
STEP FORWARD, HOLY FATHER...!
THE BLACK MAGICIANS ABOVE RECOIL, HISSING...
IT IS A WHITE DRUID OF PICTLAND!

IT IS INDEED.
UNLESS MY SENSES DECEIVE ME, IT IS NONE OTHER THAN DIVIATIX.
"DIVIATIX!" THE CRY ARISES FROM A HUNDRED THROATS; YET, AT A SIGNAL FROM THE PRINCE OF SORCERERS, THEY FALL SILENT.
THE PRESSURE OF SCORES OF EYES POUR DOWN UPON KING CONAN AND HIS TRIO OF COMPANIONS.
THE SILENT, CONCENTRATED POWER OF THOSE BLACK, GLITTERING EYES IS UNNERVING.


SUDDENLY, A COLDNESS LIKE A SINISTER, BLEAK WIND FROM ONE OF HIS FROZEN NORTHERN HELLS BLOWS UPON THE MONARCH'S HEART-- HIS LIMBS GROW NUMB, HIS VISION BLURS--
MORE-- WIZARDRY--!
FATHER! CAN'T BREATHE-- I--
THEN, EVEN AS CONAN FEELS THE IRON DRAIN FROM HIS MUSCLES-- SENSES HIS KNEES NEAR TO BUCKLING--
COME, NUADENS-- COME DANU-- COME EPONA!
STAND BESIDE YOUR SERVANT, DIVIATIX!
THE GROUP-SPELL IS BROKEN.
NEXT MOMENT, THE MAGICIANS OF THE BLACK RING SAG BACK, THEIR CONCENTRATION SHATTERED...
...AND CONAN IS STUNNED TO SEE FRESH YOUNG LEAVES SPROUT ABRUPTLY FROM THE DEAD WOOD OF THE STAFF!
FOR HIS OWN PART, DIVIATIX SWAYS, CHUCKLING... AS IF ALL THE WINE HE HAD DRUNK THAT NIGHT HAS AT LAST CAUGHT UP WITH HIM.
HEH HEH HEH
AS FOR THE MOST EVIL OF MAGES: HE SMILES NO LONGER.
YOU HAVE HAD YOUR MOMENT AT THE CENTER OF THE STAGE, WHITE DRUID.
NOW, 'TIS THE HOUR OF THE BLACK RING-- AND OF THOTH-AMON!

SMITTEN WITH A SECOND BEAM OF CRACKLING GREEN FLAMES, DIVIATIX FENDS IT OFF WITH HIS STAFF--
--AND IT BREAKS INTO A SHOWER OF HISSING SPARKS!
HE'S WON, FATHER! DIVIATIX HAS WON!
I HOPE SO, BOY, BUT--

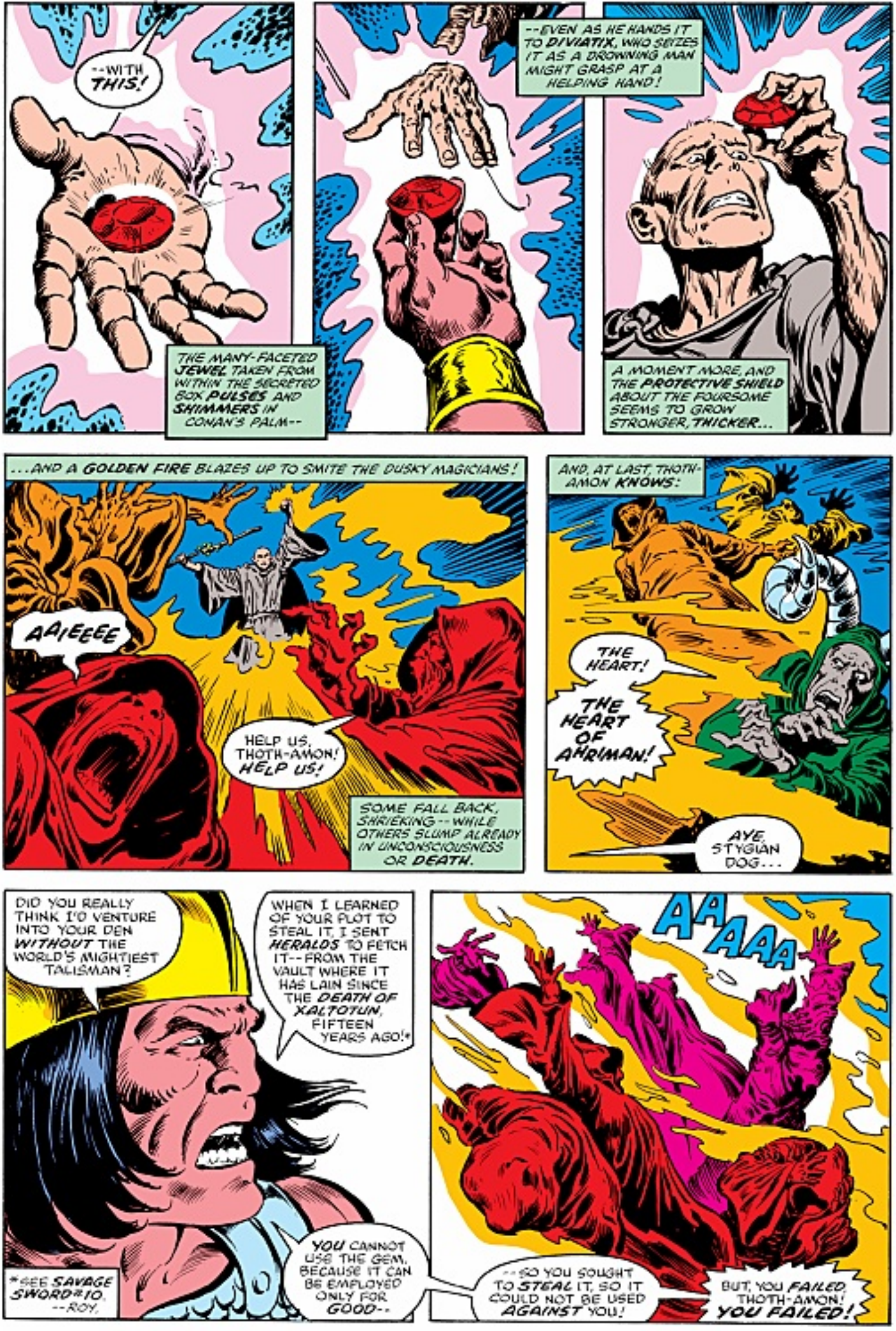
EVEN AS CONAN SPEAKS, THOTH-AMON HURLS ANOTHER BURST--
--ANOTHER--
--AND YET ANOTHER!

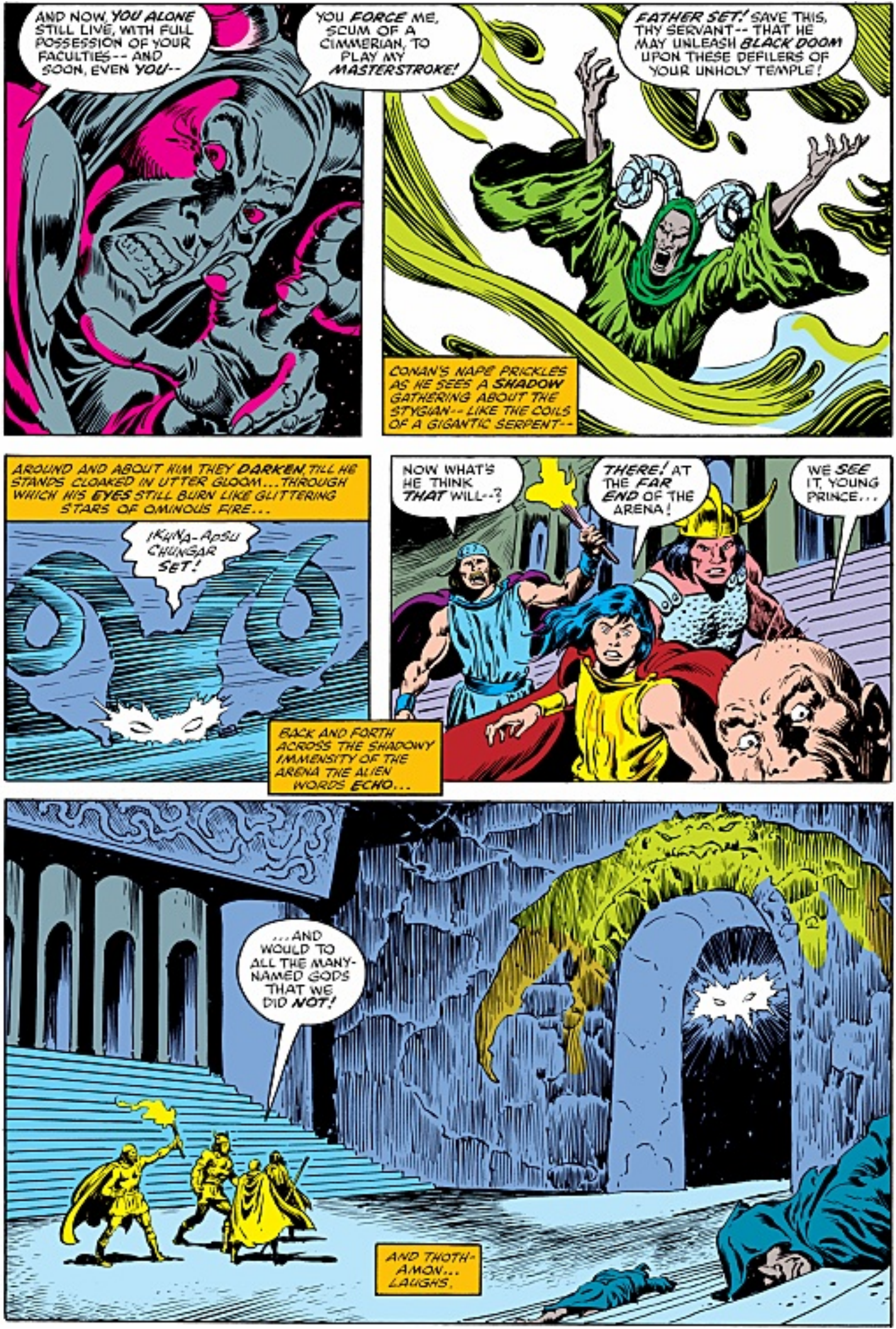

AND THE PRIME SORCERERS OF THE BLACK RING TAKE HEART FROM THEIR LEADER--
--ADDING THEIR OWN BEAMS OF GREEN FORCE TO THE DEADLY SHOWER.
FOR A FEW MOMENTS, THE DRUID'S PULSING AURA STAVES THEM OFF...

BUT THEN, DIVIATIX BEGINS TO WEAKEN...

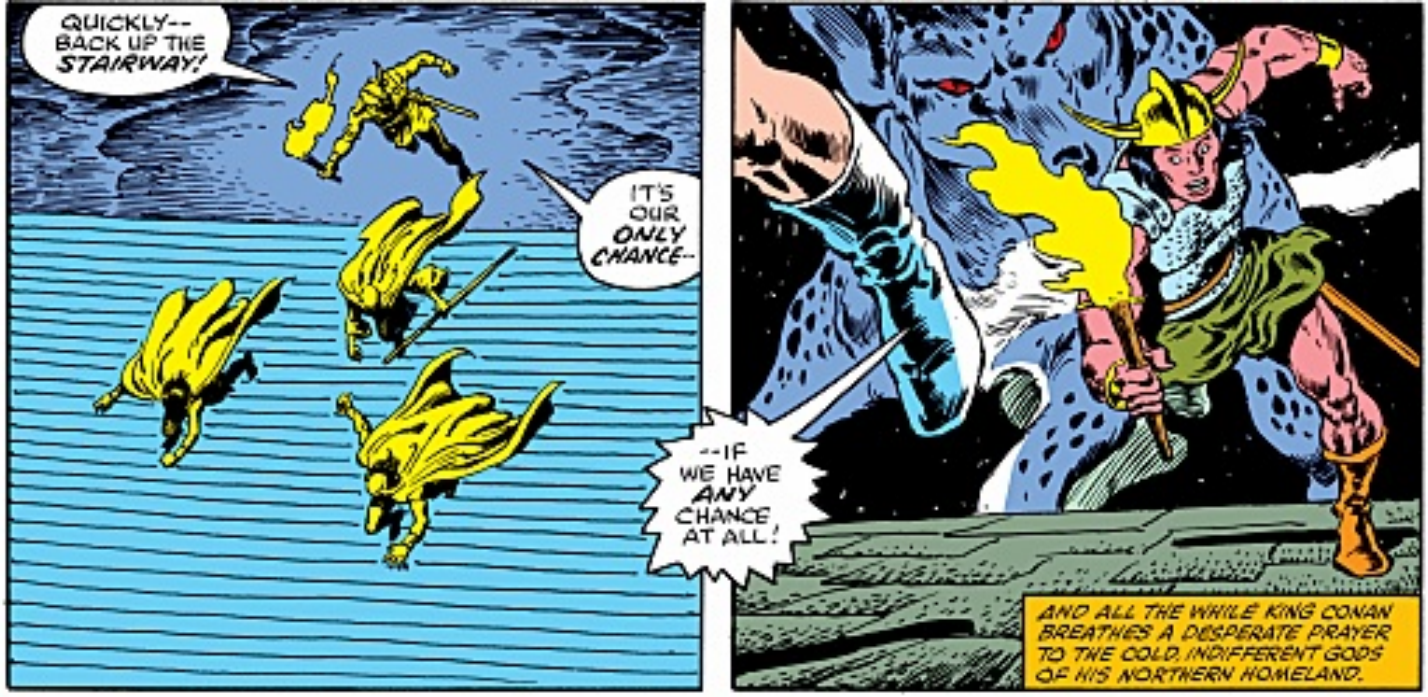
HAH! WHITE MAGIC FAILS IN THE CONTEST OF STRENGTH, CIMMERIAN!

WELL, THEN, PERHAPS IT IS TIME TO STRENGTHEN IT, STYGIAN--


--WITH THIS!
THE MANY-FACETED JEWEL TAKEN FROM WITHIN THE SECRETED BOX PULSES AND SHIMMERS IN CONAN'S PALM--
--EVEN AS HE HANDS IT TO DIVIATIX, WHO SEIZES IT AS A DROWNING MAN MIGHT GRASP AT A HELPING HAND!
A MOMENT MORE, AND THE PROTECTIVE SHIELD ABOUT THE FOURSOME SEEMS TO GROW STRONGER, THICKER...
...AND A GOLDEN FIRE BLAZES UP TO SMITE THE DUSKY MAGICIANS!
AAIEEEE
HELP US, THOTH-AMON! HELP US!
SOME FALL BACK, SHRIEKING--WHILE OTHERS SLUMP ALREADY IN UNCONSCIOUSNESS OR DEATH.
AND, AT LAST, THOTH-AMON KNOWS:
THE HEART!
THE HEART OF AHRIMAN!
AYE, STYGIAN DOG...
DID YOU REALLY THINK I'D VENTURE INTO YOUR DEN WITHOUT THE WORLD'S MIGHTIEST TALISMAN?
WHEN I LEARNED OF YOUR PLOT TO STEAL IT, I SENT HERALDS TO FETCH IT--FROM THE VAULT WHERE IT HAS LAIN SINCE THE DEATH OF XALTOTUN, FIFTEEN YEARS AGO!*
*SEE SAVAGE SWORD #10. --ROY.
YOU CANNOT USE THE GEM, BECAUSE IT CAN BE EMPLOYED ONLY FOR GOOD--
AAAAA
--SO YOU SOUGHT TO STEAL IT, SO IT COULD NOT BE USED AGAINST YOU!
BUT, YOU FAILED, THOTH-AMON! YOU FAILED!


AND NOW, YOU ALONE STILL LIVE, WITH FULL POSSESSION OF YOUR FACULTIES-- AND SOON, EVEN YOU--
YOU FORCE ME, SCUM OF A CIMMERIAN, TO PLAY MY MASTERSTROKE!
FATHER SET! SAVE THIS, THY SERVANT-- THAT HE MAY UNLEASH BLACK DOOM UPON THESE DEFILERS OF YOUR UNHOLY TEMPLE!
CONAN'S NAPE PRICKLES AS HE SEES A SHADOW GATHERING ABOUT THE STYGIAN-- LIKE THE COILS OF A GIGANTIC SERPENT--
AROUND AND ABOUT HIM THEY DARKEN TILL HE STANDS CLOAKED IN UTTER GLOOM... THROUGH WHICH HIS EYES STILL BURN LIKE GLITTERING STARS OF OMINOUS FIRE...
IKUNA-APSU CHUNGAR SET!
NOW WHAT'S HE THINK THAT WILL--?
THERE! AT THE FAR END OF THE ARENA!
WE SEE IT, YOUNG PRINCE...
BACK AND FORTH ACROSS THE SHADOWY IMMENSITY OF THE ARENA THE ALIEN WORDS ECHO...
...AND WOULD TO ALL THE MANY-NAMED GODS THAT WE DID NOT!
AND THOTH-AMON... LAUGHS.

THEN, ITS OWN HELLISH LAUGHTER ECHOING THROUGH THE CHAMBER, IT SPRINGS FORTH FROM THE ABYSS OF DARKNESS...
HII HII
NOR IS IT ANY INSUBSTANTIAL SHADOW, FOR THE EARTH TREMBLES BENEATH ITS PONDEROUS TREAD.
CROM!
GODS, HELP US! IT IS THE LIVING PROTOTYPE OF THE BLACK SPHINX ABOVE!
EVEN THOTH-AMON HAS FLED THE COMING FORTH OF THE BEAST HIS PRAYERS HAVE ROUSED FROM ITS EONS OF SLUMBER.
TROCERO-- THE TORCH!
DIVIATIX-- CAN'T YOU--?
NAY! NOT EVEN THE HEART OF AHRIMAN CAN GIVE ME POWER OVER THE BLACK BEAST-- THE VERY CHILD OF CHAOS ITSELF!
RUN, LAD-- RUN!
DAMN THIS VAST CHAMBER! IT MIGHT ALMOST HAVE BEEN HEWN FROM THE ROCK FOR THE MONSTER'S CONVENIENCE.
AND NONE OF THOSE PASSAGES YONDER ARE NARROW ENOUGH TO ELUDE THE THING.
HII HII HII HII

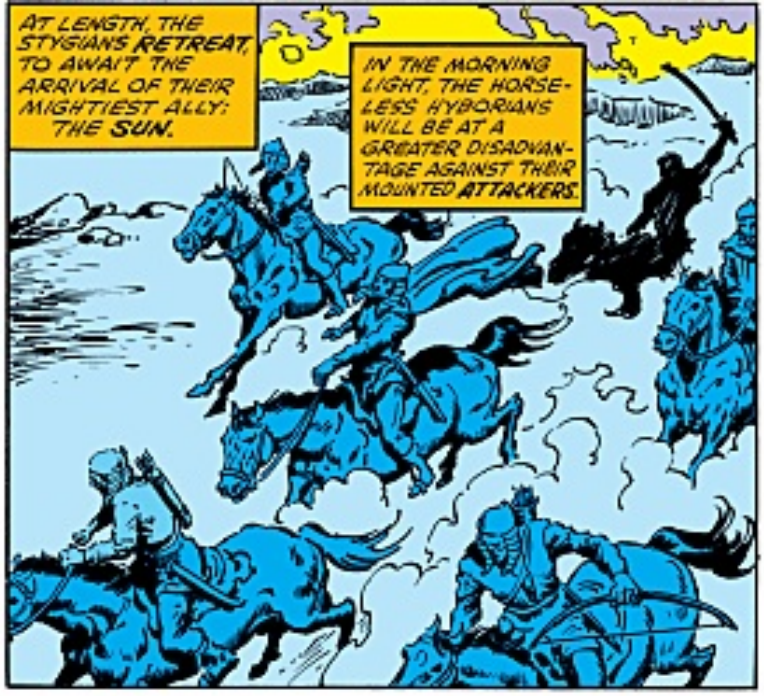

QUICKLY-- BACK UP THE STAIRWAY!
IT'S OUR ONLY CHANCE--
--IF WE HAVE ANY CHANCE AT ALL!
AND ALL THE WHILE KING CONAN BREATHES A DESPERATE PRAYER TO THE COLD, INDIFFERENT GODS OF HIS NORTHERN HOMELAND.

NOT THAT IT SEEMS TO BE DOING MUCH GOOD.

WHILE, ABOVE:
THE STYGIAN ARCHERS, MADE BRAVE BY THE SUCCESS OF THEIR SURPRISE ASSAULT, RIDE EVER NEARER THE DEFENDING HYBORIANS...

OCCASIONALLY, TOO NEAR...

...AND THE BOSSONIAN LONGBOWS TAKE THEIR TOLL ON THE MOUNTED STYGIANS, WITH THEIR SHORTER WEAPONS.
WHEN THE HEAVY AQUILONIAN SHAFTS STRIKE HOME, THEY PIERCE THROUGH MAIL AND CLOTH AND FLESH TO THE VITALS.


AT LENGTH, THE STYGIANS RETREAT, TO AWAIT THE ARRIVAL OF THEIR MIGHTIEST ALLY: THE SUN.
IN THE MORNING LIGHT, THE HORSELESS HYBORIANS WILL BE AT A GREATER DISADVANTAGE AGAINST THEIR MOUNTED ATTACKERS.

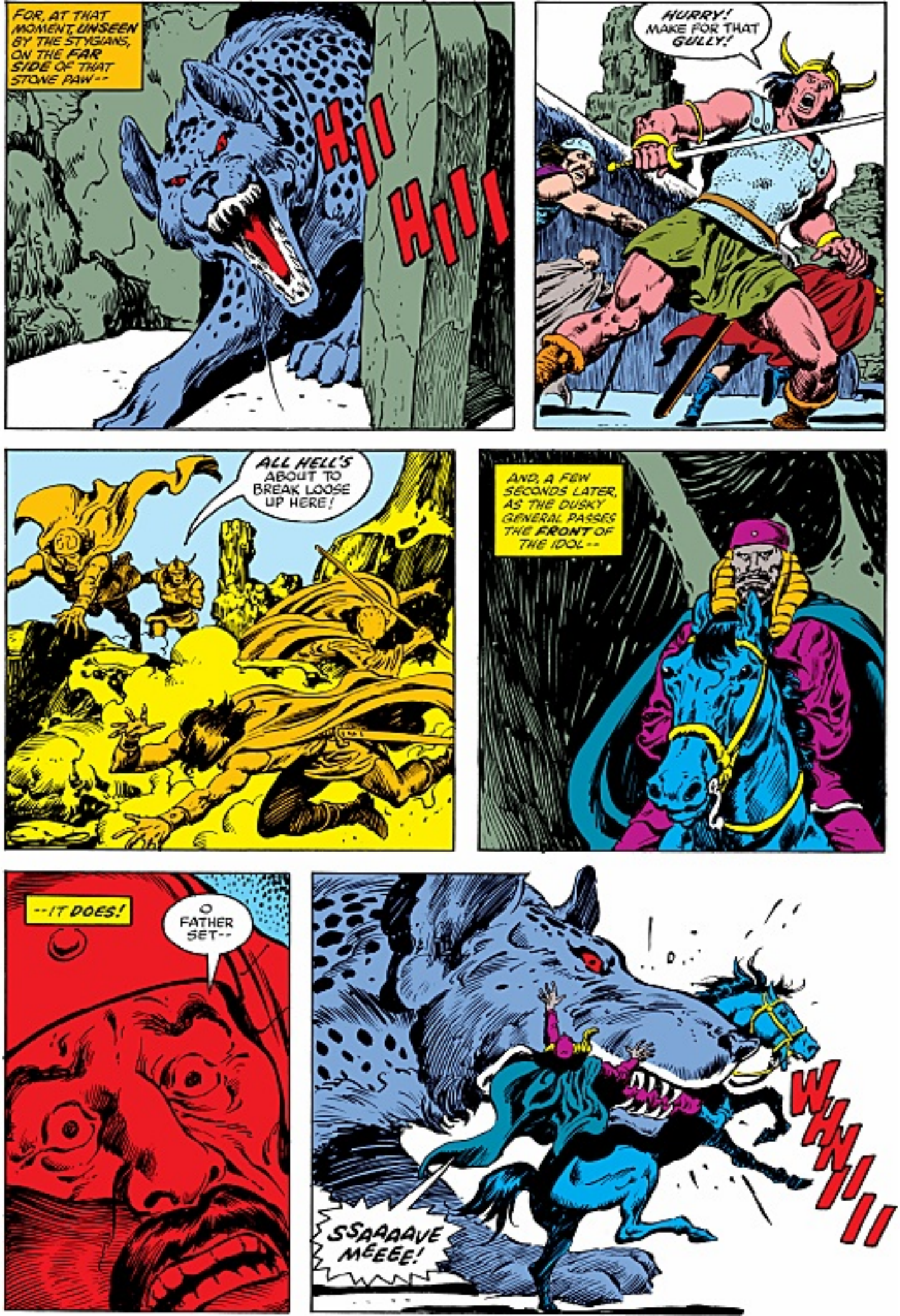
MEANWHILE:
STONE GRATES--AND THE MASSIVE PORTAL IN THE BREAST OF THE BLACK SPHINX SWINGS OPEN.
UNNNHH--!!

FATHER--I CAN STILL FEEL THE GROUND TREMBLE BENEATH US...!
AYE, CONN. THE BLACK BEAST IS STILL AFTER US.
AND--LOOK THERE, ALL--!

THOTH-AMON MUST HAVE SUMMONED THE WHOLE ACCURSED STYGIAN ARMY!
THERE'S ONE OF ITS GENERALS, DOUBTLESS EXHORTING HIS FOLLOWERS TO DESTROY THE FILTHY FOREIGN WORSHIPPERS OF UNCLEAN GODS.
IF WE RUN FOR OUR CAMP, AND THEY SEE US, IT WILL BE THE LAST--

WE HAVE NO CHOICE, KING.
THE VIBRATIONS OF THE APPROACHING GHOUL-HYENA GROW STRONGER...
THEN, FOLLOW ME!
THERE'S A GULLY OVER THERE THAT-

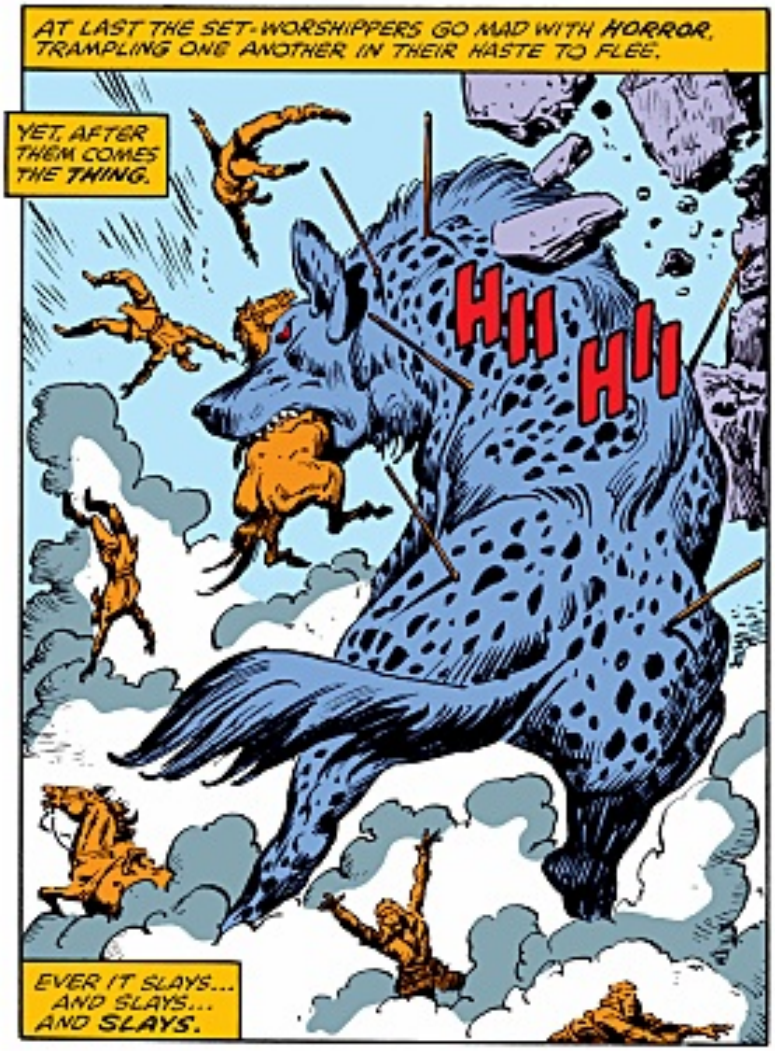
JUST THEN, THE STYGIAN REINFORCEMENTS BEGIN TO MOVE OUT TOWARD THE AQUILONIAN CAMP.
AS THE FATES WOULD WEAVE IT, THEY'VE CHOSEN AN ILL MOMENT TO RIDE PAST THE LEFT PAW OF THE SPHINX...


FOR, AT THAT MOMENT, UNSEEN BY THE STYGIANS, ON THE FAR SIDE OF THAT STONE PAW--
HII
HIII
HURRY! MAKE FOR THAT GULLY!
ALL HELL'S ABOUT TO BREAK LOOSE UP HERE!
AND, A FEW SECONDS LATER, AS THE DUSKY GENERAL PASSES THE FRONT OF THE IDOL--
--IT DOES!
O FATHER SET--
SSAAAAVE MÉEEE!
WHNIII

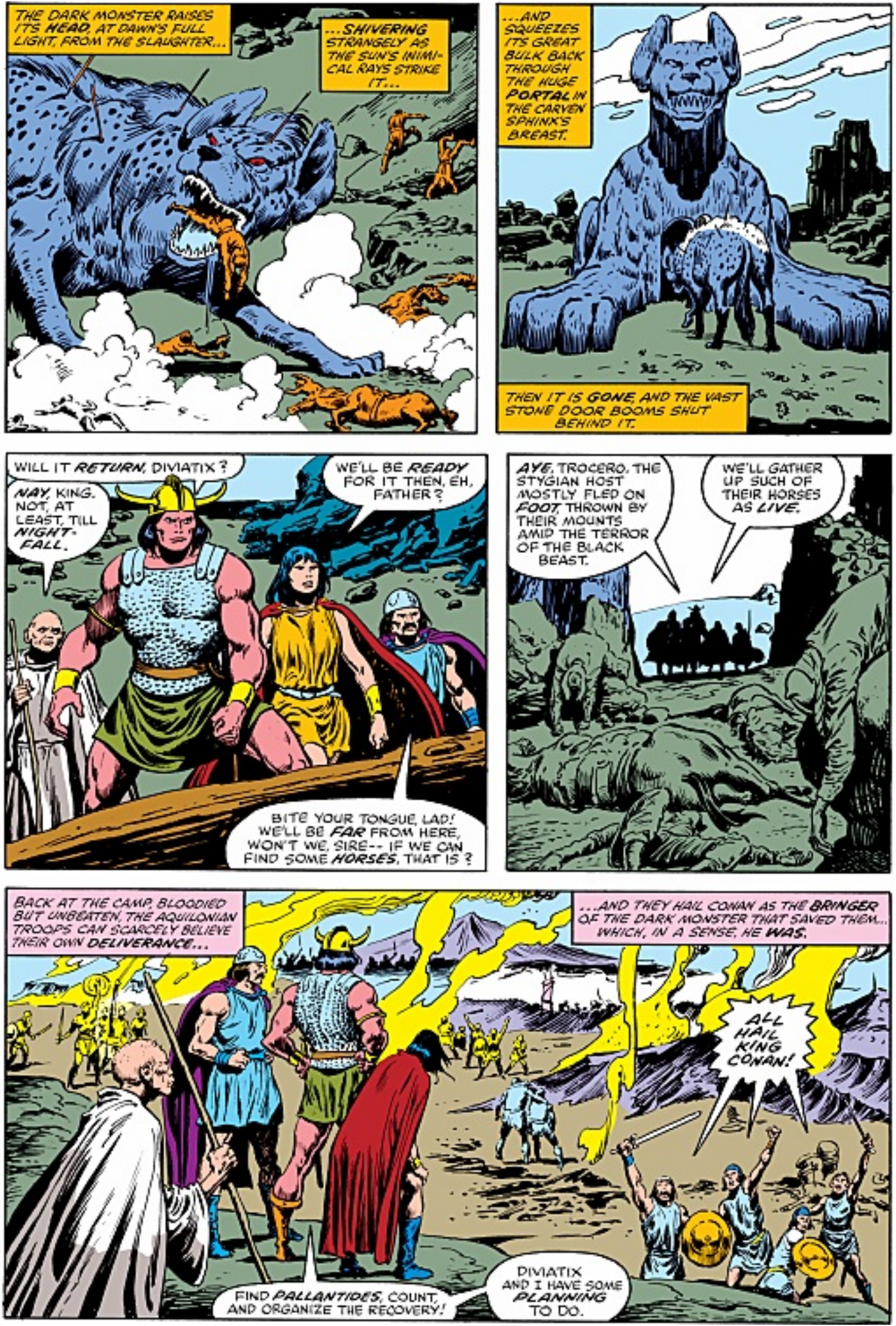
FLINGING ASIDE THE CRUSHED AND CRIMSON BODY OF THE GENERAL, THE GREAT GHOUL-HYENA TURNS, TO TOWER FOR AN INSTANT OVER THE STYGIAN HOST-- LOOKING FOR ALL THE WORLD LIKE THE LIVING CUB OF THE STONE CREATURE IT RESEMBLES.
THEN, IT IS AMONG THEM--
HII HIII
HIII
--AND THE AIR IS HIDEOUS WITH THE SHRIEKING OF MANGLED HORSES, THE AGONY AND TERROR OF BROKEN MEN.

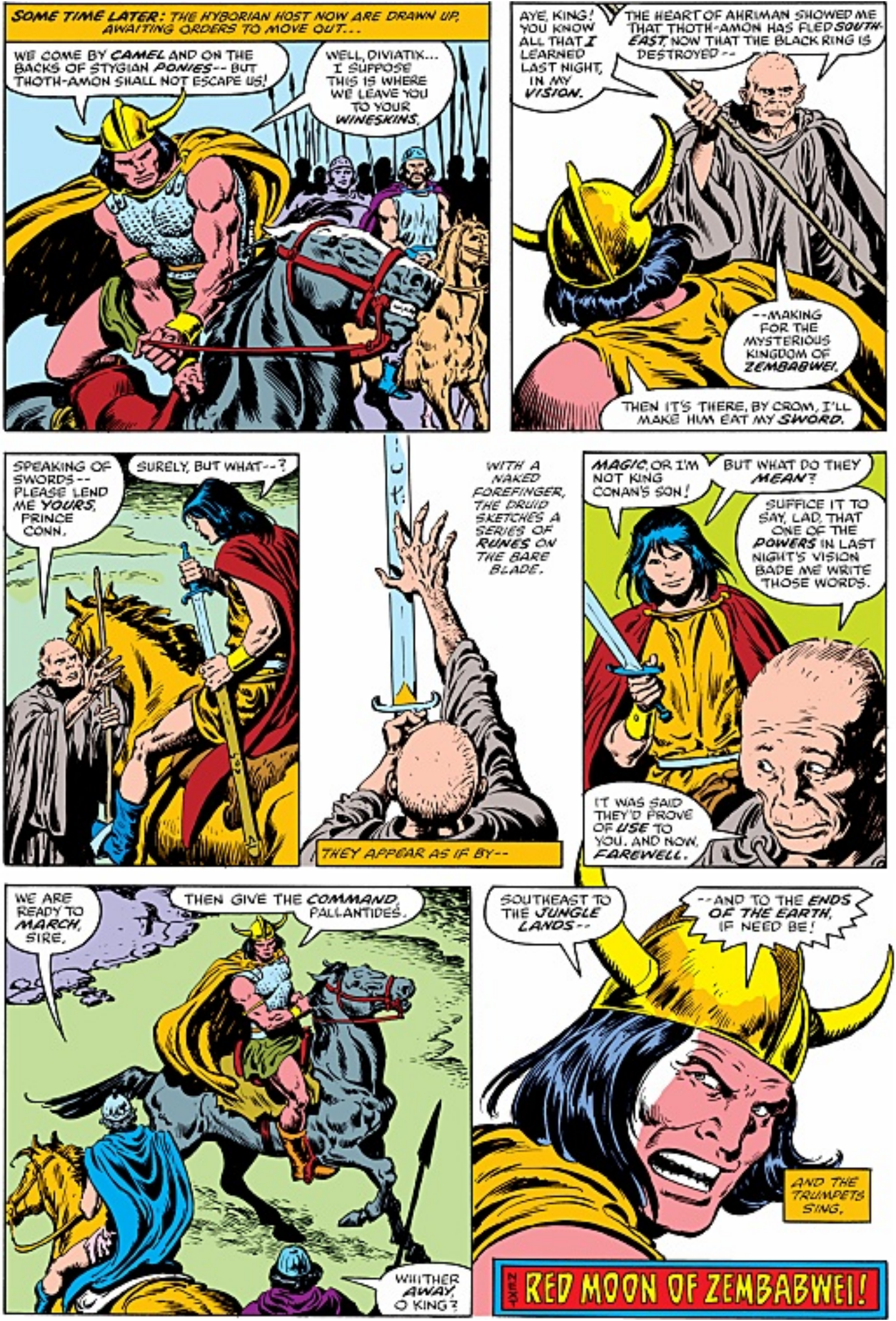
THE STYGIANS, FOR THEIR PART, DO NOT LACK COURAGE... AND THEIR SECOND-IN-COMMAND ORDERS ONE DESPERATE CHARGE, HORRIFIED THOUGH HE BE.

BUT THE BLACK BEAST SWEEPS HIS MEN TO EARTH WITH SLASHING CLAWS AND SNAPPING JAWS AS FAST AS THEY COME WITHIN REACH!


AT LAST THE SET-WORSHIPPERS GO MAD WITH HORROR, TRAMPLING ONE ANOTHER IN THEIR HASTE TO FLEE.
YET, AFTER THEM COMES THE THING.
HII HII
EVER IT SLAYS... AND SLAYS... AND SLAYS.

AT LONG LAST, THE SUN'S GOLDEN DISC LIFTS ABOVE THE DESERT BEYOND THE BAKHR...


THE DARK MONSTER RAISES ITS HEAD, AT DAWN'S FULL LIGHT, FROM THE SLAUGHTER...
...SHIVERING STRANGELY AS THE SUN'S INIMICAL RAYS STRIKE IT...
...AND SQUEEZES ITS GREAT BULK BACK THROUGH THE HUGE PORTAL IN THE CARVEN SPHINX'S BREAST.
THEN IT IS GONE, AND THE VAST STONE DOOR BOOMS SHUT BEHIND IT.
WILL IT RETURN, DIVIATIX?
NAY, KING. NOT, AT LEAST, TILL NIGHT-FALL.
WE'LL BE READY FOR IT THEN, EH, FATHER?
BITE YOUR TONGUE, LAD! WE'LL BE FAR FROM HERE, WON'T WE, SIRE-- IF WE CAN FIND SOME HORSES, THAT IS?
AYE, TROCERO. THE STYGIAN HOST MOSTLY FLED ON FOOT, THROWN BY THEIR MOUNTS AMID THE TERROR OF THE BLACK BEAST.
WE'LL GATHER UP SUCH OF THEIR HORSES AS LIVE.
BACK AT THE CAMP, BLOODIED BUT UNBEATEN, THE AQUILONIAN TROOPS CAN SCARCELY BELIEVE THEIR OWN DELIVERANCE...
...AND THEY HAIL CONAN AS THE BRINGER OF THE DARK MONSTER THAT SAVED THEM... WHICH, IN A SENSE, HE WAS.
ALL HAIL KING CONAN!
FIND PALLANTIDES, COUNT, AND ORGANIZE THE RECOVERY!
DIVIATIX AND I HAVE SOME PLANNING TO DO.


SOME TIME LATER: THE HYBORIAN HOST NOW ARE DRAWN UP, AWAITING ORDERS TO MOVE OUT...
WE COME BY CAMEL AND ON THE BACKS OF STYGIAN PONIES-- BUT THOTH-AMON SHALL NOT ESCAPE US!
WELL, DIVIATIX... I SUPPOSE THIS IS WHERE WE LEAVE YOU TO YOUR WINESKINS.
AYE, KING! YOU KNOW ALL THAT I LEARNED LAST NIGHT, IN MY VISION.
THE HEART OF AKRIMAN SHOWED ME THAT THOTH-AMON HAS FLED SOUTH-EAST, NOW THAT THE BLACK RING IS DESTROYED --
--MAKING FOR THE MYSTERIOUS KINGDOM OF ZEMBABWEI.
THEN IT'S THERE, BY CROM, I'LL MAKE HIM EAT MY SWORD.
SPEAKING OF SWORDS -- PLEASE LEND ME YOURS, PRINCE CONN.
SURELY, BUT WHAT--?
WITH A NAKED FOREFINGER, THE DRUID SKETCHES A SERIES OF RUNES ON THE BARE BLADE.
THEY APPEAR AS IF BY--
MAGIC, OR I'M NOT KING CONAN'S SON!
BUT WHAT DO THEY MEAN?
SUFFICE IT TO SAY, LAD, THAT ONE OF THE POWERS IN LAST NIGHT'S VISION BADE ME WRITE THOSE WORDS.
IT WAS SAID THEY'D PROVE OF USE TO YOU. AND NOW, FAREWELL.
WE ARE READY TO MARCH, SIRE.
THEN GIVE THE COMMAND, PALLANTIDES.
WHITHER AWAY, O KING?
SOUTHEAST TO THE JUNGLE LANDS--
--AND TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH, IF NEED BE!
AND THE TRUMPETS SING,
THE RED MOON OF ZEMBABWEI!

COVER PENCILER: JOHN BUSCEMA

COVER INKER: DANNY BULANADI

"Know, O prince, that the man called Conan was all things in his day: a thief, a reaver, a slayer... fierce sellsword and fiercer pirate... and finally, usurper king of proud, civilized Aquilonia, mightiest of Hyborian kingdoms... with his queen Zenobia at his side, and his son Prince Conn ripe to carry on the legend..."

—*The Nemedian Chronicles.*

Stan Lee PRESENTS: **KING CONAN**

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD

RED MOON OF ZEMBABWEI!

ADAPTED FROM THE STORY BY L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & LIN CARTER

FEATURING THE HERO CREATED BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

THE RAINY SEASON HAS COME TO UPPER ZEMBABWEI... BUT SO HAS CONAN OF AQUILONIA.

FOR MORE THAN A MONTH, THE CIMMERIAN-BORN MONARCH HAS DRIVEN HIS ADOPTED LAND'S HOST ON AND ON, FOLLOWING THE COURSE OF THE RIVER STYX SOUTH TOWARD ITS UNKNOWN SOURCE, TILL EVEN HIS OWN SON PRINCE CONN FEELS THE WEARINESS THAT COMES TO PURSUERS...

FATHER-- HOW MUCH LONGER BEFORE WE'RE OUT OF THIS VILE SWAMP?

MY TUTORS TAUGHT ME THAT ZEMBABWEI IS MARKED BY EVER-GLADE FLATLANDS IN THE NORTH-- NOT MARSHES.

THE BOUNDARIES OF KINGDOMS ARE SELDOM MARKED BY LINES, AS THEY ARE ON SCHOLARS' MAPS, CONN.

BUT, WE'LL REACH ZEMBABWEI'S BORDER SOON, AND HAVE DONE WITH THE SWAMPS OF SOUTHERN PUNT.

KEEP MOVING, ALL!

ROY THOMAS
WRITER / EDITOR

JOHN BUSCEMA
ARTIST

DANNY BULANADI
EMBELLISHER

JOE ROSEN
LETTERER

G. ROUSSOS
COLORIST

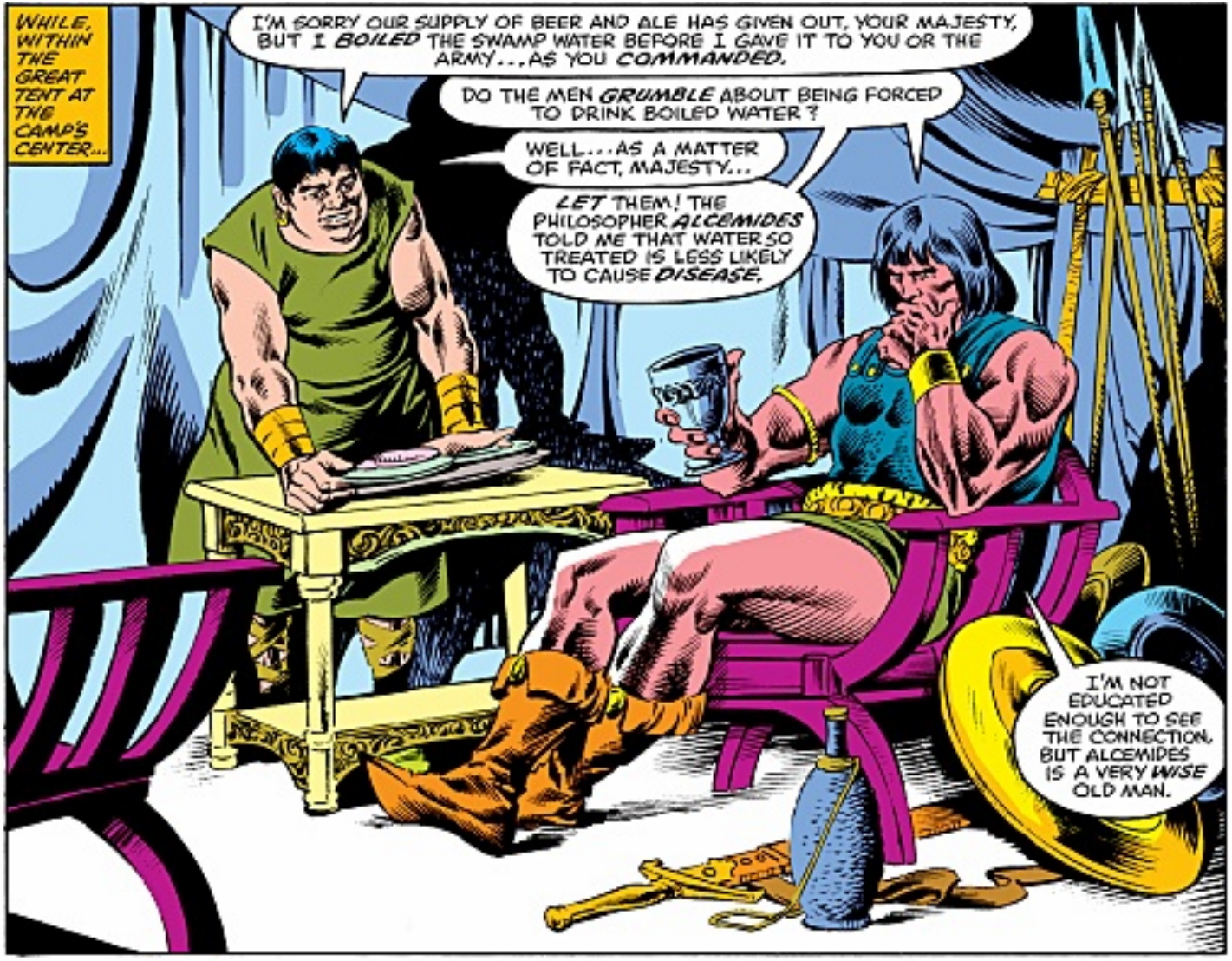
JIM SHOOTER
CONSULTING EDITOR

WHILE, JUST OUT OF EARSHOT...
LOOKS LIKE RAIN, EH, PALLANTIDES?
BY MITRA, TELL ME SOMETHING NEW, COUNT TROCERO!
IT'S RAINED EVERY DAY FOR THE PAST TEN, TILL I'VE GIVEN UP TRYING TO KEEP THE RUST OFF MY GEAR.
CURSE ME, BUT I WISH THAT OLD TOSSPOT OF A DRUID WERE STILL WITH US!
PERHAPS OLD DIVIATIX COULD HAVE MAGICKED US THROUGH THE AIR TO OLD ZEMBABWEI--OR THE FORBIDDEN CITY, AS ITS VILE INHABITANTS DO CALL IT.
ANYTHING WOULD BE BETTER THAN SLOGGING THROUGH THIS INFERNAL MIRE!
EVEN I MUST AGREE WITH YOU THERE, GENERAL.
I FEAR THAT, BY THE TIME WE REACH THE FORBIDDEN CITY, OUR MEN MAY BE IN NO SHAPE TO FIGHT THE SNAKE-WORSHIPPERS.
STILL, YOU KNOW WHY DIVIATIX HAD TO RETURN NORTH.
AYE. ONLY A WHITE DRUID SUCH AS HE COULD KEEP THE SAVAGE PICTS FROM RISING, WHILE WE'RE BUSY ELSEWHERE.
STILL, TOO BAD HE HAD TO TAKE THE HEART OF AHRIMAN WITH HIM.
IT HAD TO BE RESTORED TO THE GREAT MITRAEUM IN TARANTIA, MY FRIEND...YOU KNOW THAT.
BESIDES, THOUGH CONAN MAY BE THE MIGHTIEST WARRIOR-KING OF OUR AGE, HE IS STILL NO WIZARD...
...AND ONLY A MAGE, OR AT LEAST A DRUID, COULD HAVE USED THAT MAGICAL GEM EFFECTIVELY.
WELL, AT LEAST, BEFORE HE LEFT, DIVIATIX, USED HIS POWERS OF DIVINATION TO TELL US WHERE THOTH-AMON FLED TO.
NOT THAT THE STYGIAN HAD MUCH CHOICE!
THE LEADERS OF THE WHITE HAND OF HYPERBOREA AND OF THE EASTERN SCARLET CIRCLE WERE BOTH CRUSHED AT POHIOLA, MONTHS AGO.*
*ISSUE #1. --R.T.

THERE'S NO REFUGE LEFT FOR THOTH-AMON, SAVE ZEMBABWEI'S FORBIDDEN CITY.
AYE, FOR THERE HIS LAST ALLY--NENAUNIR, THE SUPREME WIZARD OF THE GOD DAMBALLAH, RULES COUNTLESS HORDES FROM HIS SKULL THRONE...OR SO IT'S SAID.
SMALL WONDER, AFTER HIS DEFEAT AT NEBTHU," THE MASTER OF THE BLACK RING FLED SOUTHWARD.
AND WHERE THOTH-AMON GOES, CAN CONAN BE FAR BEHIND?
"LAST ISSUE. --ROY.

HALT, COMPANY!
NIGHT FALLS SWIFTLY--AND WE CAN ADVANCE NO FURTHER!
"AT LAST WE'VE EMERGED FROM THAT TORTUROUS SWAMP," BREATHES COUNT TROCERO.

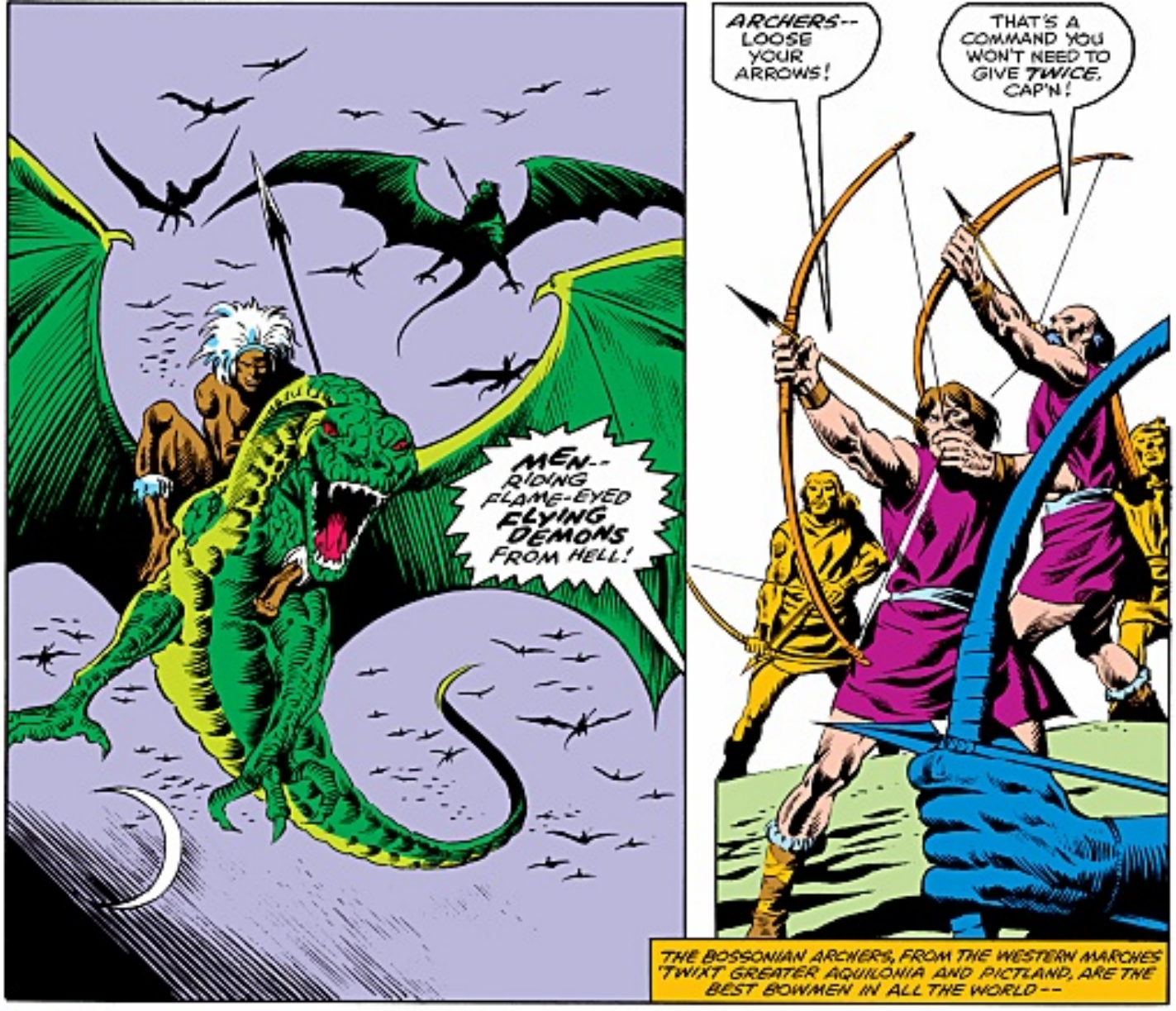
SOON, UPON THE WATER-FREE KNOLL WHICH THE KING HAS CHOSEN, COOKING FIRES GLIMMER THROUGH THE GLOOM.
FATIGUED AQUILONIAN MEN-AT-ARMS FORGET THEIR GRUMBLING AND CURSING, EVEN THE BOTHERSOME INSECTS, AS THEY FILL THEIR GRUMBLING BELLIES.
MEANWHILE, AT THE FAR EDGES OF THE CAMP, SENTRIES PACE THE MARGIN OF THE SWAMP, EXCHANGING CURT PASSWORDS.
THERE ARE MORE VIPERS THAN ONLY LEGLESS ONES, IN THIS UNTAMED LAND SOUTH OF PUNT.


WHILE, WITHIN THE GREAT TENT AT THE CAMP'S CENTER...
I'M SORRY OUR SUPPLY OF BEER AND ALE HAS GIVEN OUT, YOUR MAJESTY, BUT I BOILED THE SWAMP WATER BEFORE I GAVE IT TO YOU OR THE ARMY...AS YOU COMMANDED.
DO THE MEN GRUMBLE ABOUT BEING FORCED TO DRINK BOILED WATER?
WELL...AS A MATTER OF FACT, MAJESTY...
LET THEM! THE PHILOSOPHER ALCEMIDES TOLD ME THAT WATER SO TREATED IS LESS LIKELY TO CAUSE DISEASE.
I'M NOT EDUCATED ENOUGH TO SEE THE CONNECTION, BUT ALCEMIDES IS A VERY WISE OLD MAN.

AH...CONN! HAVE YOU GROOMED THE MOUNTS ALREADY?
YES, FATHER. BUT YOURS TRIED TO BITE ME.
HORSES AREN'T VERY BRIGHT; YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO HANDLE THE BRUTES.
ANYWAY, HAVE SOME FOOD... SUCH AS IT IS.

I MISS THAT BLACK STEED OF YOURS...THE ONE CALLED YMIR, AFTER THAT NORTHERN GOD.
SO DO I, SON. WHEN WE GO NORTH, I'LL MAKE THE KOTHIANS AND OPHIREANS RETURN HIM, IF I HAVE TO TURN THEIR KINGDOMS INSIDE OUT.
CURSE THOSE DOGS, ANYWAY! BAD ENOUGH THEY DESERTED, WITHOUT TAKING MANY OF OUR BEST HORSES!*
*LAST ISSUE. --R.

MMMM... THAT BOILED STEAK ISN'T HALF BAD.
IS COUNT TROCERO STILL TRYING TO GET YOU TO SEND ME BACK TO TARANTIA, FATHER?
HE HAS AQUILONIA'S BEST INTERESTS AT HEART, AT LEAST AS HE SEES THEM.
NONE OF MY COUNCILORS LIKE THE IDEA OF BOTH MYSELF AND MY HEIR BEING HERE.
BUT, I THINK IT BETTER FOR THE NEXT KING OF AQUILONIA TO LEARN OF WARFARE IN THE FIELD, NOT FROM DUSTY BOOKS.
WELL, BEST TOUR THE CAMP BEFORE WE TURN IN; I'LL SLEEP BETTER IF I KNOW ALL IS SECURE.
BUT, IT SEEMS TO BE-- EH?
WHAT'S THAT SUDDEN UPROAR-- ARISING AT CAMP'S EDGE?
SOUND THE TRUMPETS, MAN! WE ARE ATTACKED!
BUT-- BY WHOM? I SEE NO ENEMY... NOR HEAR ANY HORSES' HOOVES.
CAN'T YOU HEAR? THAT SOUND-- COMING OUT OF THE VERY SKY!
WHAT BUT SORCERY COULD CAUSE SUCH A ROAR-- SO LOUD I CAN SCARCELY HEAR MYSELF SHOUT!
STRANGE SOUND! IT REMINDS ME, MORE THAN ANYTHING, OF THE BOOM OF SAILS AS THEY FILLED WITH A GUSTY WIND, BACK IN MY PIRATE DAYS.
BUT-- WHAT'S THAT, JUST ABOVE THE HORIZON-- HALF OBSCURED BY THE MISTS?
A'EEE! LOOK THERE-- AGAINST THE CRESCENT MOON!
WHAT IN CROM'S NAME--?


MEN-- RIDING FLAME-EYED FLYING DEMONS FROM HELL!
ARCHERS-- LOOSE YOUR ARROWS!
THAT'S A COMMAND YOU WON'T NEED TO GIVE TWICE, CAP'N!
THE BOSSONIAN ARCHERS, FROM THE WESTERN MARCHES 'TWIXT GREATER AQUILONIA AND PICTLAND, ARE THE BEST BOWMEN IN ALL THE WORLD--

--AS THE EERIE ATTACKERS SOON LEARN!
AAAAAIII!

MOTHER OF MITRA-- THE THINGS ARE TAME!
SHOOT THE RIDERS OFF THEIR BACKS, THEN-- AND WE'LL HAVE NO MORE TO FEAR FROM THEM!

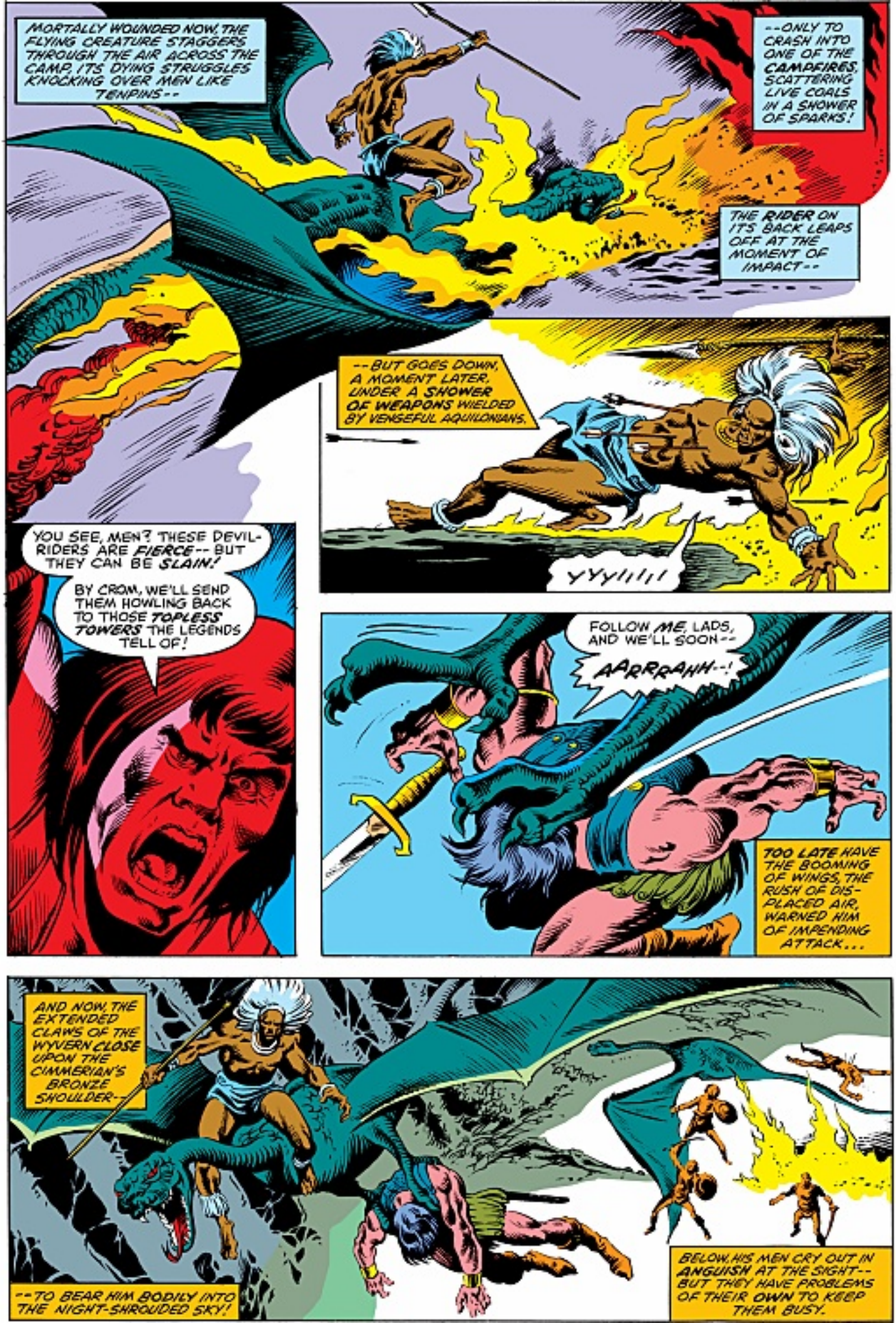
IT'S HARD TO SEE A TARGET THAT SMALL WITH SO LITTLE MOONLIGHT-- LET ALONE HIT IT.
EASIER SAID THAN DONE, MAJESTY!
UNNGN
STILL, THE BELEAGUERED ARCHERS LOOSE VOLLEY AFTER VOLLEY INTO THE AIR-- MANY OF WHICH MERELY REBOUND HARMLESSLY OFF THE LEATHERY SCALES OF THE WINGED MONSTERS--

--WHILE OTHER SWOOPING GARGOYLES GO FOR THE ARMY'S HORSES--
WHNEEEEE

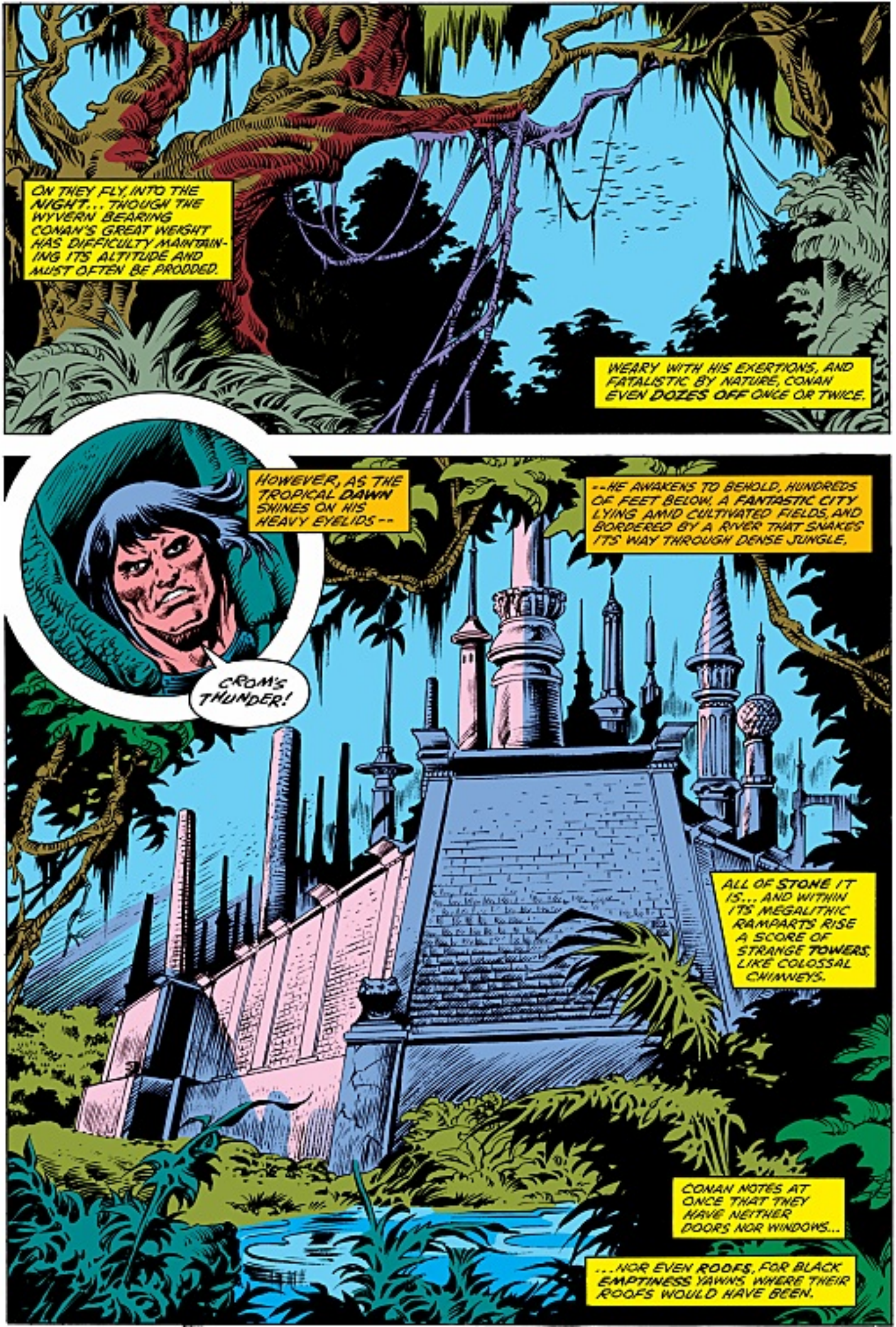
--AND STILL OTHERS SWOOP DOWN AMID THE AQUILONIAN HOST ITSELF.

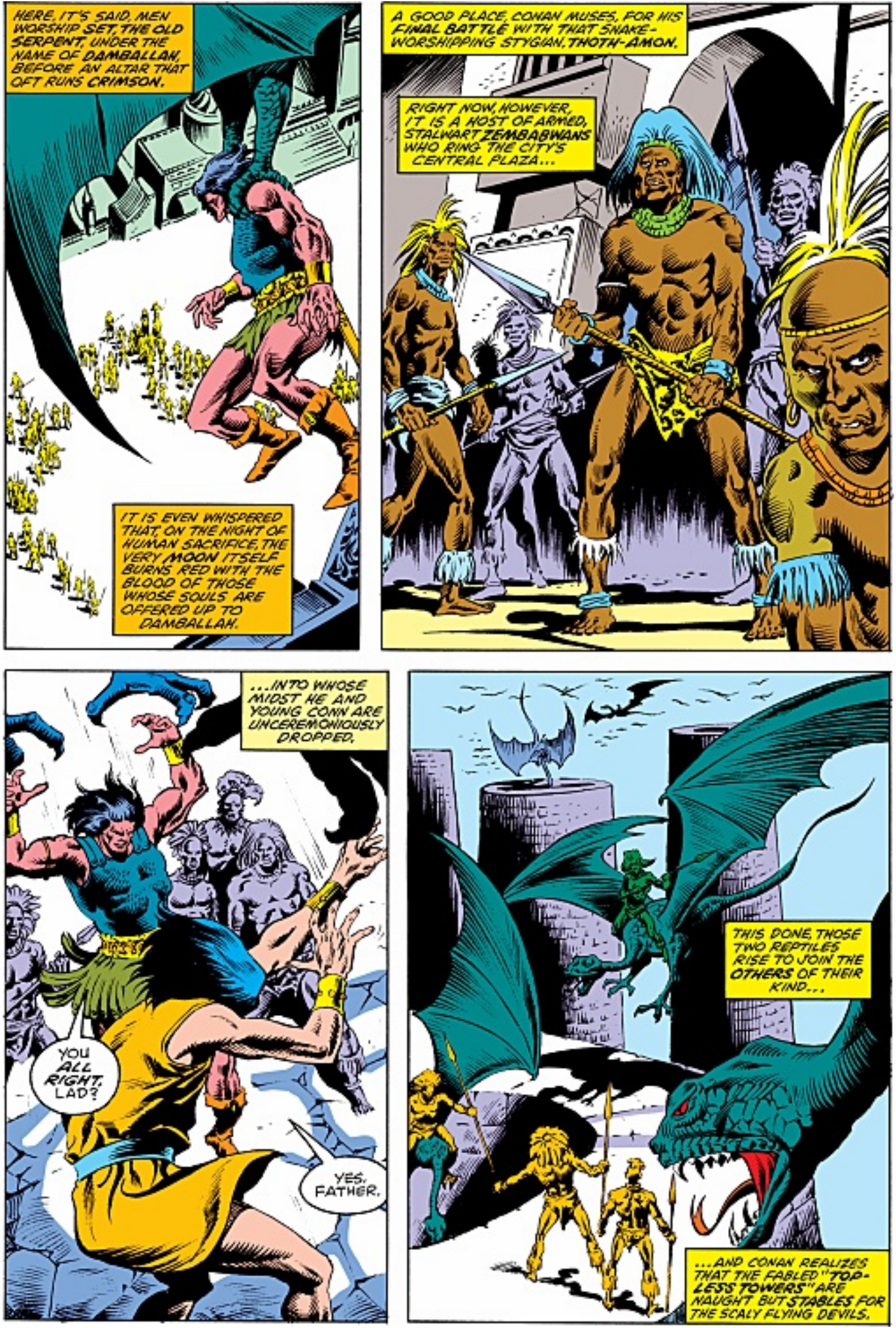
FATHER-- WHAT--?
GET BACK OUT OF HARM'S WAY, BOY!
I'VE HEARD LEGENDS OF THESE REPTILES-- WYVERNS, THEY'RE CALLED--

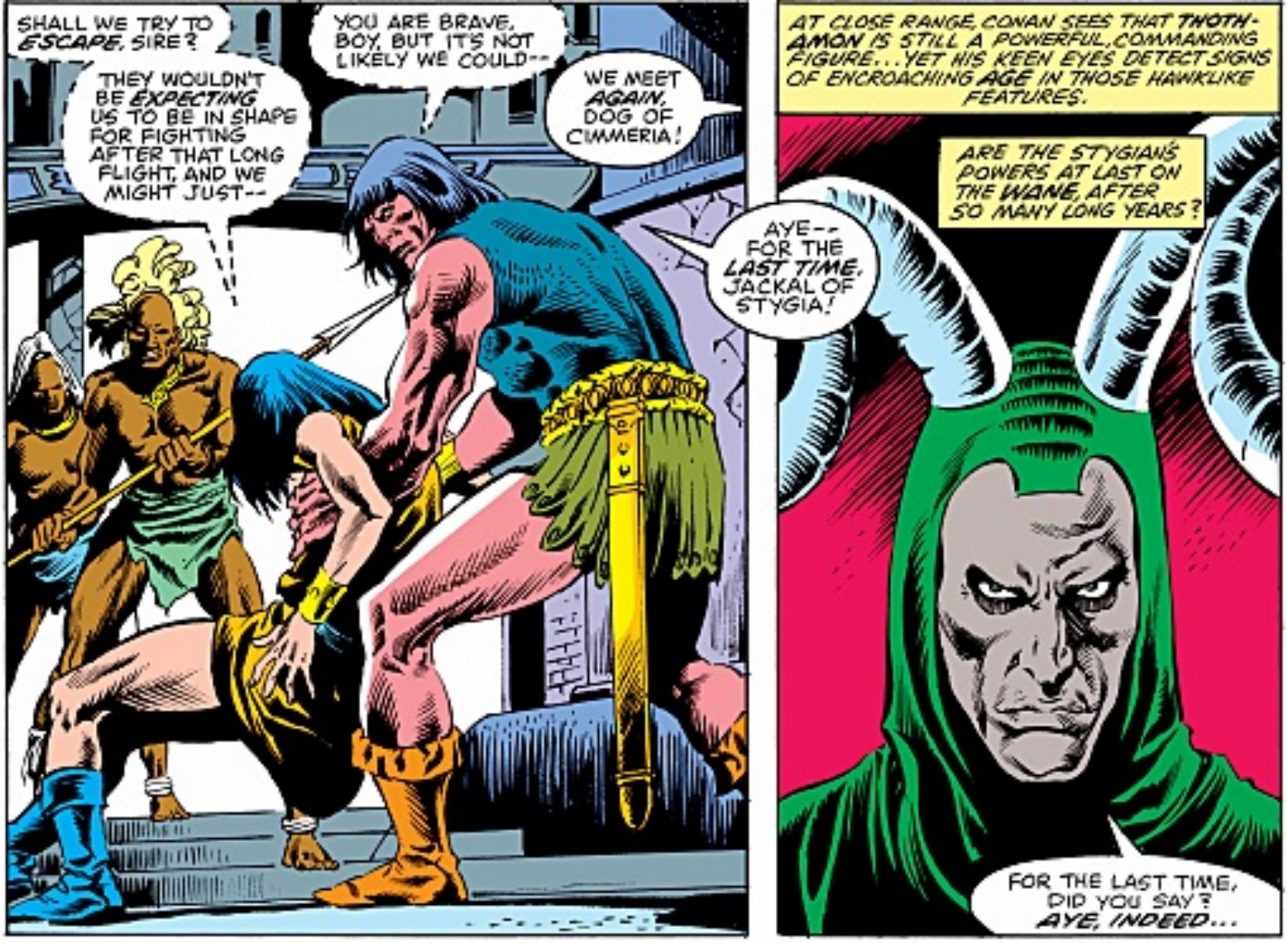
AND, WHAT'S MORE TO THE POINT--
--IN MY DAY, I'VE FOUGHT DEVILS THAT WOULD MAKE THESE SEEM LIKE TOADS BY COMPARISON!
CROM, THOUGH-- I WISH, EVEN DYING, THEY MADE SOME SOUND.


MORTALLY WOUNDED NOW, THE FLYING CREATURE STAGGERS THROUGH THE AIR ACROSS THE CAMP, ITS DYING STRUGGLES KNOCKING OVER MEN LIKE TENPINS--
--ONLY TO CRASH INTO ONE OF THE CAMPFIRES, SCATTERING LIVE COALS IN A SHOWER OF SPARKS!
THE RIDER ON ITS BACK LEAPS OFF AT THE MOMENT OF IMPACT--
--BUT GOES DOWN, A MOMENT LATER, UNDER A SHOWER OF WEAPONS WIELDED BY VENGEFUL AQUILONIANS.
YYYyiiiii
YOU SEE, MEN? THESE DEVIL-RIDERS ARE FIERCE-- BUT THEY CAN BE SLAIN!
BY CROM, WE'LL SEND THEM HOWLING BACK TO THOSE TOPLESS TOWERS THE LEGENDS TELL OF!
FOLLOW ME, LADS, AND WE'LL SOON--
AARRAHH--!
TOO LATE HAVE THE BOOMING OF WINGS, THE RUSH OF DISPLACED AIR, WARNED HIM OF IMPENDING ATTACK...
AND NOW, THE EXTENDED CLAWS OF THE WYVERN CLOSE UPON THE CIMMERIAN'S BRONZE SHOULDER--
--TO BEAR HIM BODILY INTO THE NIGHT-SHROUDED SKY!
BELOW, HIS MEN CRY OUT IN ANGUISH AT THE SIGHT-- BUT THEY HAVE PROBLEMS OF THEIR OWN TO KEEP THEM BUSY.

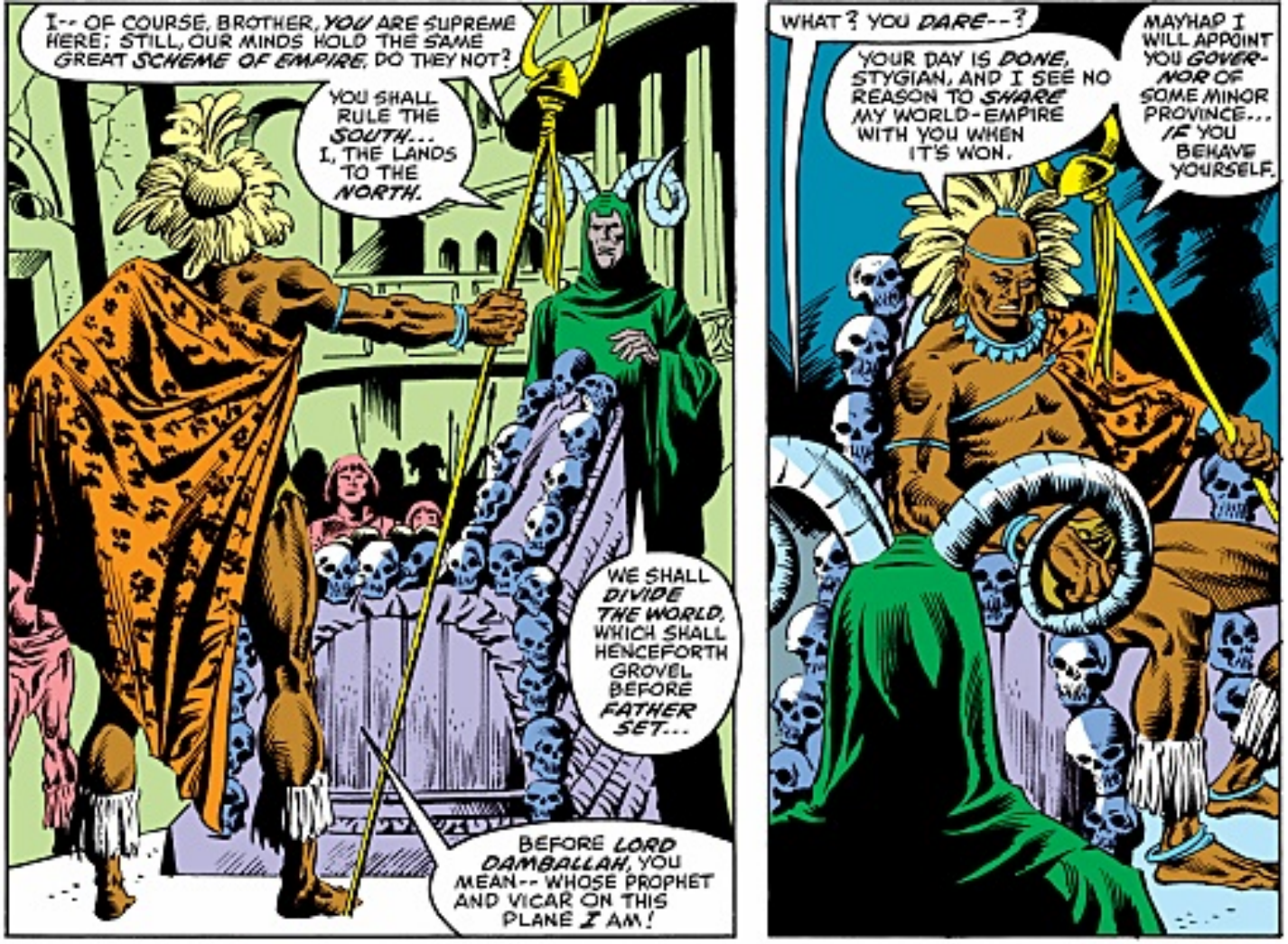
THE WIND, TEARING PAST THE KING, HELPS HIM GATHER HIS SCATTERED WITS...
...AND HE REALIZES WITH A SILENT CURSE THAT THE SWORD HAS BEEN KNOCKED FROM HIS HAND.
HIS DAGGER, HE RECALLS, HE LEFT IN HIS TENT.
YET, AS HE GLANCES AT THE DARK GROUND SINKING AWAY BELOW HIM--
--HE SENSES THAT NEITHER SWORD NOR DAGGER WOULD DO HIM MUCH GOOD AT THIS MOMENT.
BEST NOT TO STRUGGLE OVERMUCH, LEST THE WYVERN DROP HIM TO HIS DEATH.
GOOD THING, AT LEAST, THAT HIS MAILSHIRT PROTECTS HIS HIDE FROM THE BEAST'S HUGE CLAWS.
THEN-- A SUDDEN CRY FROM BEHIND HIM--
FATHER--!
WHAT--?
PRINCE CONN!
NEITHER FATHER NOR SON CAN MAKE OUT ANY MORE WORDS, ABOVE THE BEATING OF GARGANTUAN WINGS...
...AS THE SECOND WYVERN DRAWS ABREAST OF THE FIRST.
THEN, BOTH SOAR AWAY, THEIR FELLOWS NOT FAR BEHIND.
BUT THEN, REASONS CONAN, WHY SLASH AT A LION'S FEET, WHEN YOU HAVE CUT OFF ITS HEAD... AND ITS HEART?


ON THEY FLY, INTO THE NIGHT... THOUGH THE WYVERN BEARING CONAN'S GREAT WEIGHT HAS DIFFICULTY MAINTAINING ITS ALTITUDE AND MUST OFTEN BE PRODDED.
WEARY WITH HIS EXERTIONS, AND FATALISTIC BY NATURE, CONAN EVEN DOZES OFF ONCE OR TWICE.
HOWEVER, AS THE TROPICAL DAWN SHINES ON HIS HEAVY EYELIDS--
--HE AWAKENS TO BEHOLD, HUNDREDS OF FEET BELOW, A FANTASTIC CITY LYING AMID CULTIVATED FIELDS, AND BORDERED BY A RIVER THAT SNAKES ITS WAY THROUGH DENSE JUNGLE.
CROM'S THUNDER!
ALL OF STONE IT IS... AND WITHIN ITS MEGALITHIC RAMPARTS RISE A SCORE OF STRANGE TOWERS, LIKE COLOSSAL CHIMNEYS.
CONAN NOTES AT ONCE THAT THEY HAVE NEITHER DOORS NOR WINDOWS...
...NOR EVEN ROOFS, FOR BLACK EMPTINESS YAWNS WHERE THEIR ROOFS WOULD HAVE BEEN.

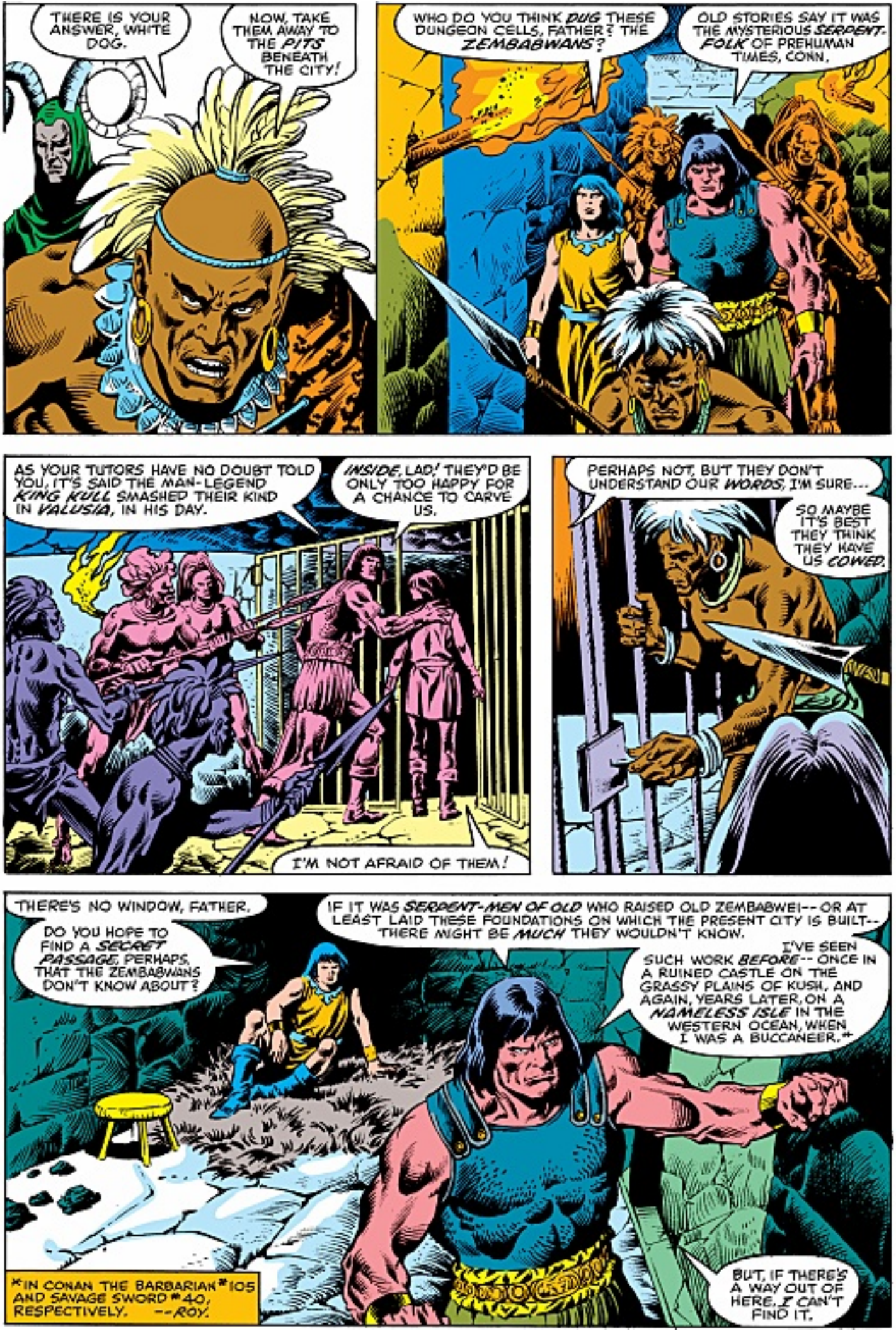

HERE, IT'S SAID, MEN WORSHIP SET, THE OLD SERPENT, UNDER THE NAME OF DAMBALLAH, BEFORE AN ALTAR THAT OFT RUNS CRIMSON.
IT IS EVEN WHISPERED THAT, ON THE NIGHT OF HUMAN SACRIFICE, THE VERY MOON ITSELF BURNS RED WITH THE BLOOD OF THOSE WHOSE SOULS ARE OFFERED UP TO DAMBALLAH.
A GOOD PLACE, CONAN MUSES, FOR HIS FINAL BATTLE WITH THAT SNAKE-WORSHIPPING STYGIAN, THOTH-AMON.
RIGHT NOW, HOWEVER, IT IS A HOST OF ARMED, STALWART ZEMBABWANS WHO RING THE CITY'S CENTRAL PLAZA...
...INTO WHOSE MIDST HE AND YOUNG CONN ARE UNCEREMONIOUSLY DROPPED.
YOU ALL RIGHT, LAD?
YES, FATHER.
THIS DONE, THOSE TWO REPTILES RISE TO JOIN THE OTHERS OF THEIR KIND...
...AND CONAN REALIZES THAT THE FABLED "TOPLESS TOWERS" ARE NAUGHT BUT STABLES FOR THE SCALY FLYING DEVILS.

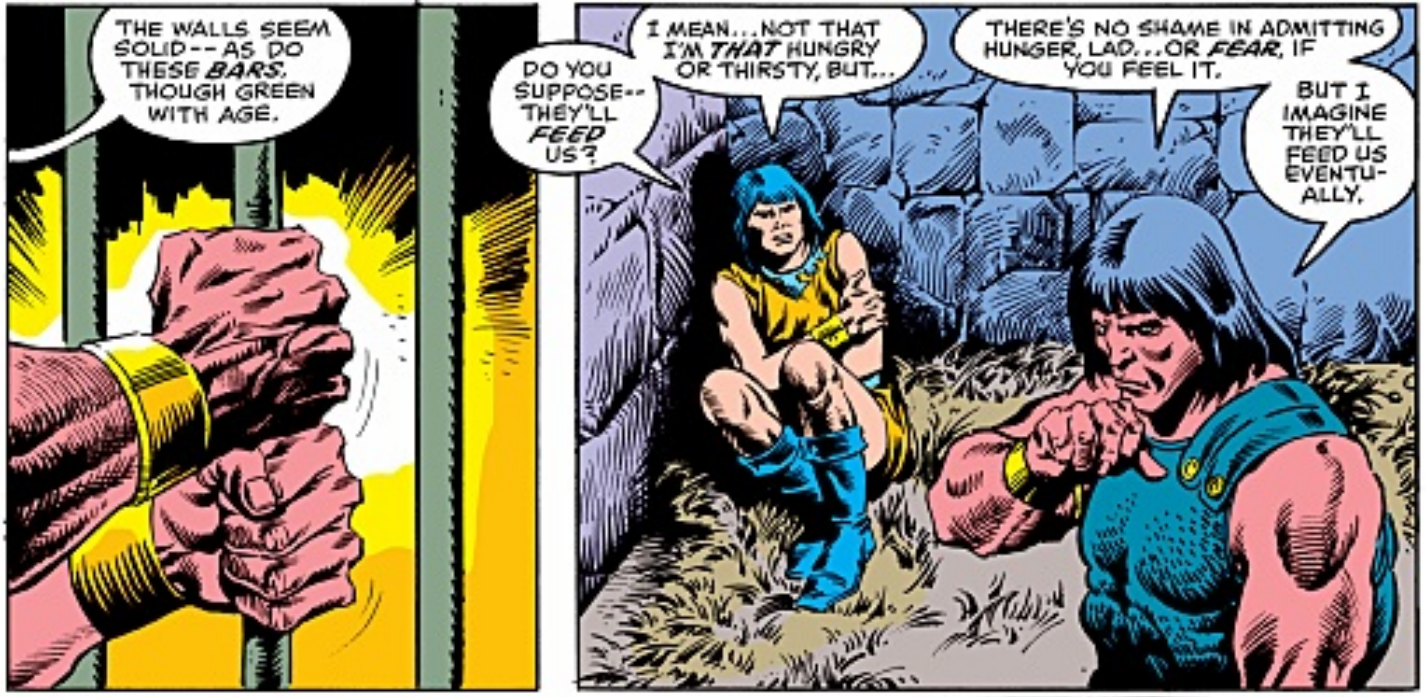

SHALL WE TRY TO ESCAPE, SIRE?
THEY WOULDN'T BE EXPECTING US TO BE IN SHAPE FOR FIGHTING AFTER THAT LONG FLIGHT, AND WE MIGHT JUST--
YOU ARE BRAVE, BOY, BUT IT'S NOT LIKELY WE COULD--
WE MEET AGAIN, DOG OF CIMMERIA!
AYE-- FOR THE LAST TIME, JACKAL OF STYGIA!
AT CLOSE RANGE, CONAN SEES THAT THOTH-AMON IS STILL A POWERFUL, COMMANDING FIGURE... YET HIS KEEN EYES DETECT SIGNS OF ENCROACHING AGE IN THOSE HAWKLIKE FEATURES.
ARE THE STYGIAN'S POWERS AT LAST ON THE WANE, AFTER SO MANY LONG YEARS?
FOR THE LAST TIME, DID YOU SAY? AYE, INDEED...

...NOR SHALL WE FENCE WITH WORDS, BUT I WILL SLAY YOU NOW WHERE YOU STAND, AND YOUR CUB BESIDE YOU!
THE WEST SHALL YET FALL, AND SET SHALL AGAIN EXTEND HIS RULE OVER THE EARTH, WHEN I SIT AS EMPEROR IN TARANTIA, CAPITAL OF AQUILONIA!
THEY'D PUT A REAL SNAKE ON THE RUBY THRONE FIRST!
AS I SAID: I'VE NO TASTE FOR MINCING WORDS.
PREPARE FOR DEATH!
I'M AS READY AS I'LL EVER BE, SCUM OF THE SOUTH!
HALT!
BY THE SPAWN OF DAMBALLAH, STYGIAN -- DO YOU FORGET WHO KINGS IT HERE?
AND APPROACHING THE SKULL THRONE IS NENAUNIR, WIZARD-KING OF ZEMBABWEI... THE LAST OF THOTH-AMON'S SORCEROUS ALLIES.


I-- OF COURSE, BROTHER, YOU ARE SUPREME HERE; STILL, OUR MINDS HOLD THE SAME GREAT SCHEME OF EMPIRE, DO THEY NOT?
YOU SHALL RULE THE SOUTH... I, THE LANDS TO THE NORTH.
WE SHALL DIVIDE THE WORLD, WHICH SHALL HENCEFORTH GROVEL BEFORE FATHER SET...
BEFORE LORD DAMBALLAH, YOU MEAN-- WHOSE PROPHET AND VICAR ON THIS PLANE I AM!
WHAT? YOU DARE--?
YOUR DAY IS DONE, STYGIAN, AND I SEE NO REASON TO SHARE MY WORLD-EMPIRE WITH YOU WHEN IT'S WON.
MAYHAP I WILL APPOINT YOU GOVERNOR OF SOME MINOR PROVINCE... IF YOU BEHAVE YOURSELF.

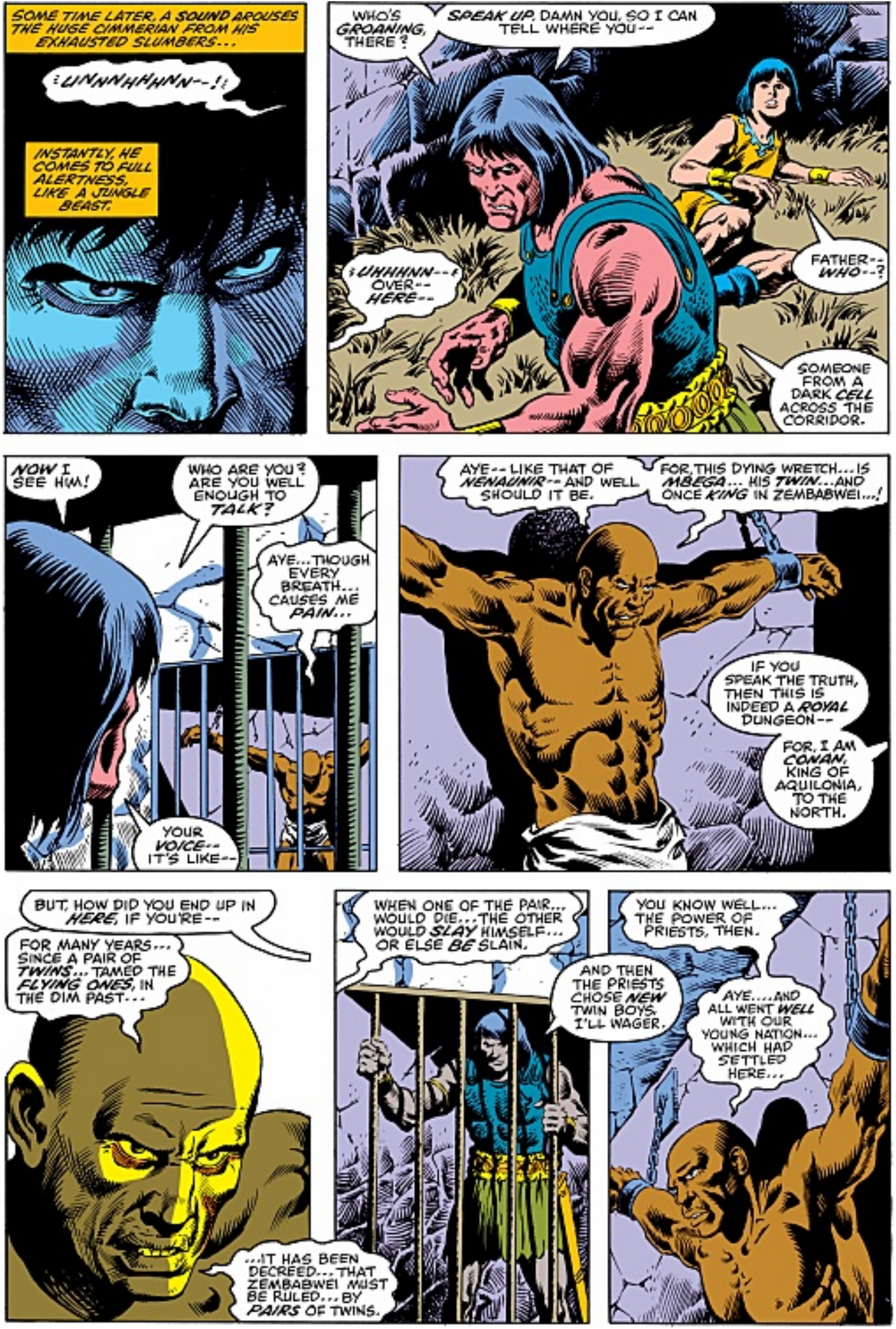
AS FOR YOU, WHITE DOG, YOU HAVE INDEED ERRED BY DARING TO ENTER MY REALM.
I'LL NOT REPEAT THE MISTAKES MADE BY THE SORCERESS LOUHI IN HYPERBOREA, OR BY THOTH-AMON HIMSELF IN STYGIA.
I SHALL PRONOUNCE YOUR DOOM ON THE NIGHT OF THE RED MOON.
AT THAT TIME, YOUR BLOOD SHALL RUN SCARLET ON THE ALTARS OF THE SLITHERING GOD, WHILE YOUR SOUL GOES SHRIEKING FORTH TO FEED THE HUNGER OF DAMBALLAH.
AND JUST WHEN IS ALL THIS TO TAKE PLACE?
YOU ARE INSOLENT, AS ALWAYS.
RIMUSH! THE STARS ARE YOUR CONCERN. WHEN COMES THE NIGHT OF THE RED MOON?
IF SOME GOD INTERFERES NOT, SIRE, IT WILL OCCUR SOME TWELVE NIGHTS FROM THE ONE JUST PAST.


THERE IS YOUR ANSWER, WHITE DOG.
NOW, TAKE THEM AWAY TO THE PITS BENEATH THE CITY!
WHO DO YOU THINK DUG THESE DUNGEON CELLS, FATHER? THE ZEMBABWANS?
OLD STORIES SAY IT WAS THE MYSTERIOUS SERPENT-FOLK OF PREHUMAN TIMES, CONN.
AS YOUR TUTORS HAVE NO DOUBT TOLD YOU, IT'S SAID THE MAN-LEGEND KING KULL SMASHED THEIR KIND IN VALUSIA, IN HIS DAY.
INSIDE, LAD,' THEY'D BE ONLY TOO HAPPY FOR A CHANCE TO CARVE US.
I'M NOT AFRAID OF THEM!
PERHAPS NOT, BUT THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND OUR WORDS, I'M SURE...
SO MAYBE IT'S BEST THEY THINK THEY HAVE US COWED.
THERE'S NO WINDOW, FATHER.
DO YOU HOPE TO FIND A SECRET PASSAGE, PERHAPS, THAT THE ZEMBABWANS DON'T KNOW ABOUT?
IF IT WAS SERPENT-MEN OF OLD WHO RAISED OLD ZEMBABWE!-- OR AT LEAST LAID THESE FOUNDATIONS ON WHICH THE PRESENT CITY IS BUILT-- THERE MIGHT BE MUCH THEY WOULDN'T KNOW.
I'VE SEEN SUCH WORK BEFORE-- ONCE IN A RUINED CASTLE ON THE GRASSY PLAINS OF KUSH, AND AGAIN, YEARS LATER, ON A NAMELESS ISLE IN THE WESTERN OCEAN, WHEN I WAS A BUCCANEER.*
BUT, IF THERE'S A WAY OUT OF HERE, I CAN'T FIND IT.
*IN CONAN THE BARBARIAN #105 AND SAVAGE SWORD #40, RESPECTIVELY. --ROY.


THE WALLS SEEM SOLID-- AS DO THESE BARS, THOUGH GREEN WITH AGE.
DO YOU SUPPOSE-- THEY'LL FEED US?
I MEAN... NOT THAT I'M THAT HUNGRY OR THIRSTY, BUT...
THERE'S NO SHAME IN ADMITTING HUNGER, LAD... OR FEAR, IF YOU FEEL IT.
BUT I IMAGINE THEY'LL FEED US EVENTUALLY.

THEY MEAN TO SACRIFICE US TO SET, DON'T THEY?
YES... BUT REMEMBER, HALF THE ARMY OF AQUILONIA IS ON ITS WAY HERE AT THIS VERY MOMENT.
I DOUBT NOT THAT PALLANTIDES IS PUSHING HIS MEN THROUGH THE JUNGLE AT A PACE THAT WOULD SLAY LESS STURDY SOULS.
THE NIGHT OF THE RED MOON IS NEARLY A FORTNIGHT AWAY, AND MUCH MAY HAPPEN BEFORE THEN.
AYE, THEY MEAN TO SACRIFICE US-- BUT IT'S NOT UP TO THEM, DAMN THEIR HIDES--
THEN, TO WHOM--?

THE GODS, BOY-- OR ELSE THAT SHADOWY FATE THE PHILOSOPHERS ALWAYS YAMMER ABOUT.
AS FOR ME... I DOZED POORLY IN THE CLAWS OF THAT WYVERN-MONSTER, AND I COULD DO WITH A BIT OF REST.
I SUPPOSE... I COULD, TOO...
...NOW THAT I...
...THINK ABOUT IT...


SOME TIME LATER, A SOUND AROUSES THE HUGE CIMMERIAN FROM HIS EXHAUSTED SLUMBERS...
:UNNNHHHNN--!:
INSTANTLY, HE COMES TO FULL ALERTNESS, LIKE A JUNGLE BEAST.
WHO'S GROANING, THERE?
SPEAK UP, DAMN YOU, SO I CAN TELL WHERE YOU--
:UHHHNN--! OVER-- HERE--
FATHER-- WHO--?
SOMEONE FROM A DARK CELL ACROSS THE CORRIDOR.
NOW I SEE HIM!
WHO ARE YOU? ARE YOU WELL ENOUGH TO TALK?
AYE...THOUGH EVERY BREATH... CAUSES ME PAIN...
YOUR VOICE-- IT'S LIKE--
AYE-- LIKE THAT OF NENAUNIR-- AND WELL SHOULD IT BE.
FOR, THIS DYING WRETCH...IS MBEGA... HIS TWIN...AND ONCE KING IN ZEMBABWEI...!
IF YOU SPEAK THE TRUTH, THEN THIS IS INDEED A ROYAL DUNGEON--
FOR, I AM CONAN, KING OF AQUILONIA, TO THE NORTH.
BUT, HOW DID YOU END UP IN HERE, IF YOU'RE--
FOR MANY YEARS... SINCE A PAIR OF TWINS... TAMED THE FLYING ONES, IN THE DIM PAST...
...IT HAS BEEN DECREED... THAT ZEMBABWEI MUST BE RULED... BY PAIRS OF TWINS.
WHEN ONE OF THE PAIR... WOULD DIE... THE OTHER WOULD SLAY HIMSELF... OR ELSE BE SLAIN.
AND THEN THE PRIESTS CHOSE NEW TWIN BOYS, I'LL WAGER.
YOU KNOW WELL... THE POWER OF PRIESTS, THEN.
AYE....AND ALL WENT WELL WITH OUR YOUNG NATION... WHICH HAD SETTLED HERE...

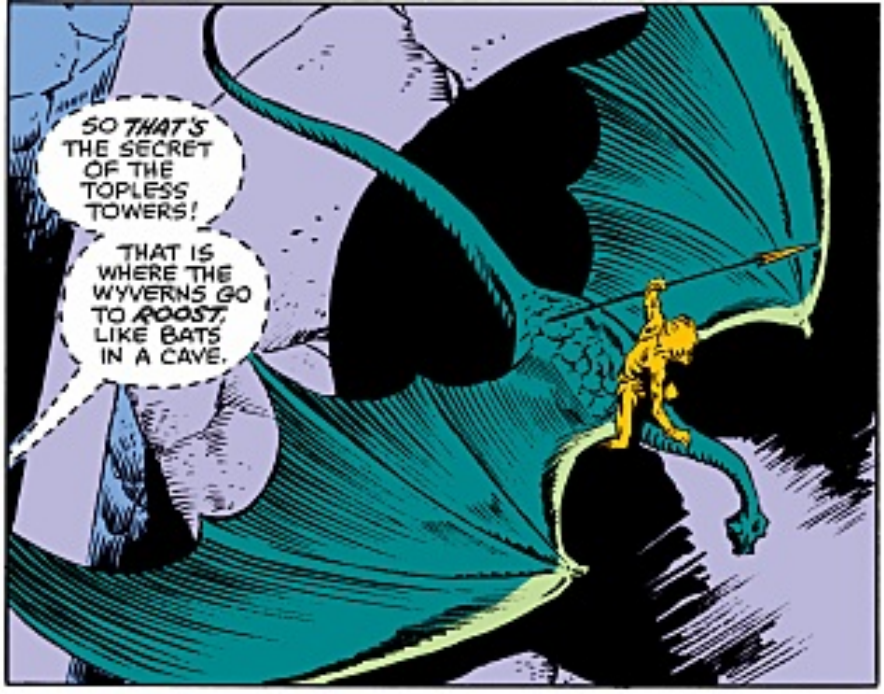
"...UNTIL THE REIGN SHARED BY NENAUNIR AND MBEGA.
"MY BROTHER FELL IN... WITH A CULT OF DEVIL-WORSHIPPERS... WHOSE ANCIENT CULT DATES BACK TO ACHERON, KINGDOM OF SHADOWS.
"THE DEMON-GOD DAMBALLAH--OR SET, AS THE STYGIANS CALL HIM--PROMISED GREATNESS TO NENAUNIR IF HE AND HIS FOLLOWERS WOULD WORSHIP HIM.
"MY TWIN BROTHER'S CONVERSION...TORE THE PEOPLE INTO FACTIONS... AND, RATHER THAN SEE THE KINGDOM RENT ASUNDER AND DROWNED IN BLOOD...
"...I SURRENDERED MY SCEPTRE... TO NENAUNIR.
"BUT, THIS DID NOT SATISFY HIM...AND HE SET ABOUT TO SLAY ALL WHO WOULD NOT BOW TO DAMBALLAH.
"AND SO, WE OTHERS WERE FORCED AT LAST TO REVOLT... BUT BY THEN WE LACKED THE POWER TO OPPOSE HIM...
HE DARES NOT SLAY ME...SO HE IMPRISONED ME...FOR SUCH LITTLE LIFE AS I HAVE LEFT...!
YET, YOUR FLOGGING--IT SEEMS RECENT.
WHEN LAST MY BROTHER PARADED ME BEFORE THE PEOPLE...I SPAT IN HIS FACE.
YOU STILL HAVE MANY FOLLOWERS IN THE CITY, THEN?
AYE...BUT THEY TOO WILL DIE... ERE LONG...!

Ten days Later:
THE GODS PRESERVE US, PALLANTIDES-- HOW MUCH FURTHER TILL WE REACH THE FORBIDDEN CITY?
THE STENCH OF ROTTING VEGETATION WAS NEARLY--
I'D LOWER MY VOICE IF I WERE YOU, COUNT--

-- UNLESS YOU WANT TO WAKE UP WHATEVER DEVILS DOUBTLESS SLUMBER BEYOND THOSE GREAT WALLS.
MITRA!

SENTRIES ON THE WALLS-- GUARDPOSTS ON THE TOWERS-- THIS WILL BE A HARD NUT TO CRACK.
AYE. IT WOULD TAKE MONTHS OF SIEGE TO FORCE AN ENTRY, AND BY THEN--
DOWN, TROCERO!--

THERE'S ONE OF THE BAT-WINGED HORRORS NOW-- BEARING ITS RIDER TOWARD THE CITY!

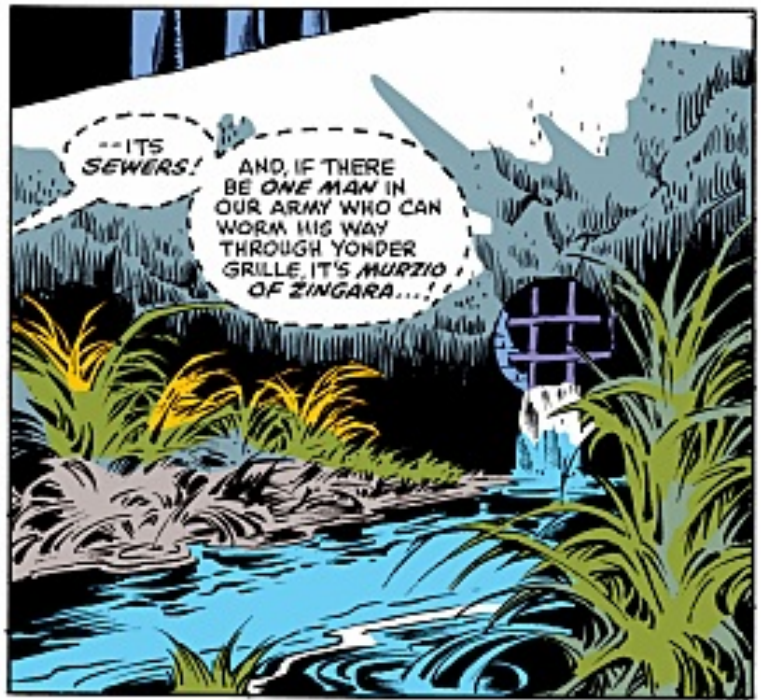

SO THAT'S THE SECRET OF THE TOPLESS TOWERS!
THAT IS WHERE THE WYVERNS GO TO ROOST, LIKE BATS IN A CAVE.

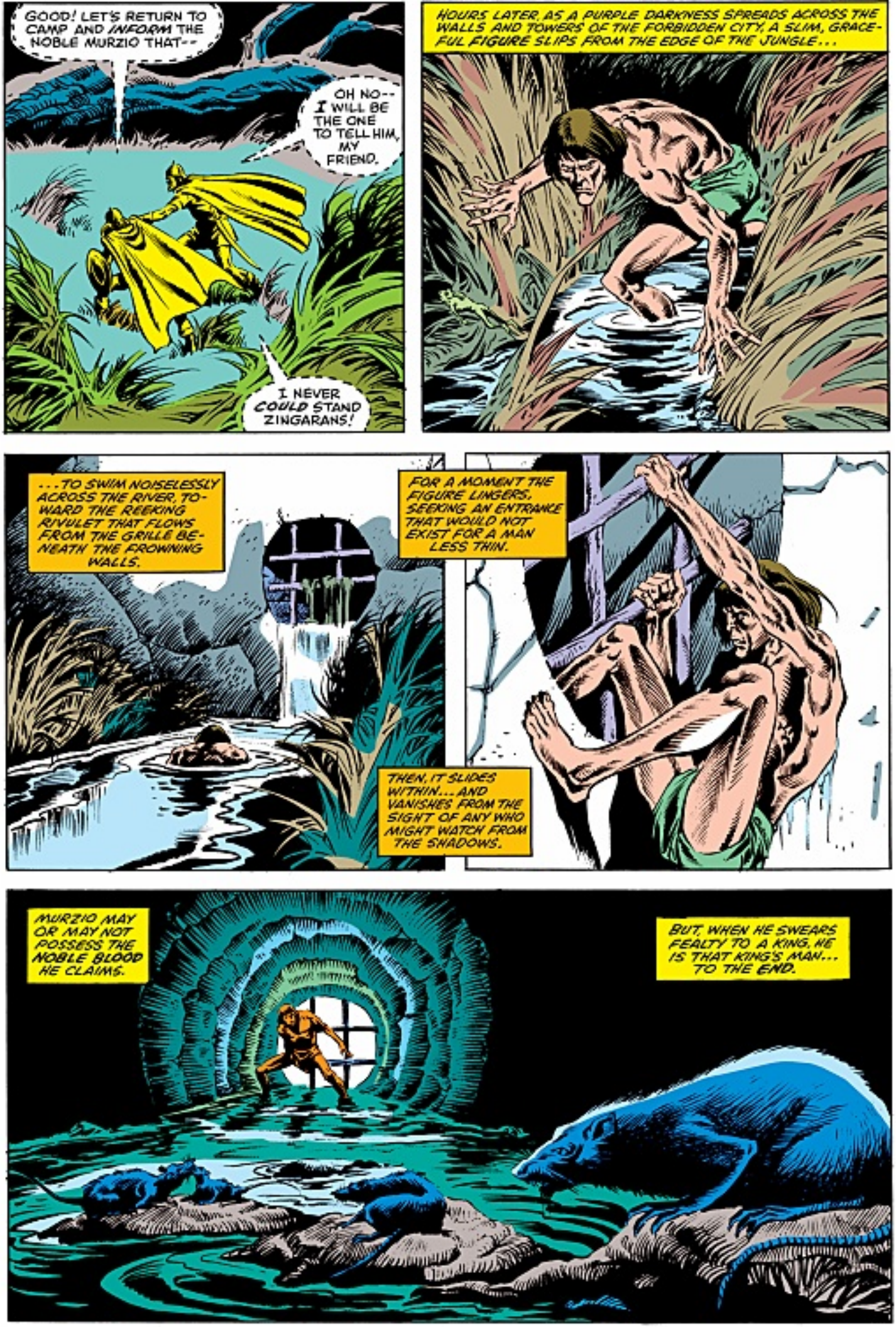
TO MOLOCH'S FLAMES WITH THE DEVILS!
WE HAVE A KING AND A PRINCE TO RESCUE!
I WONDER-- IF THEY'RE STILL ALIVE!?

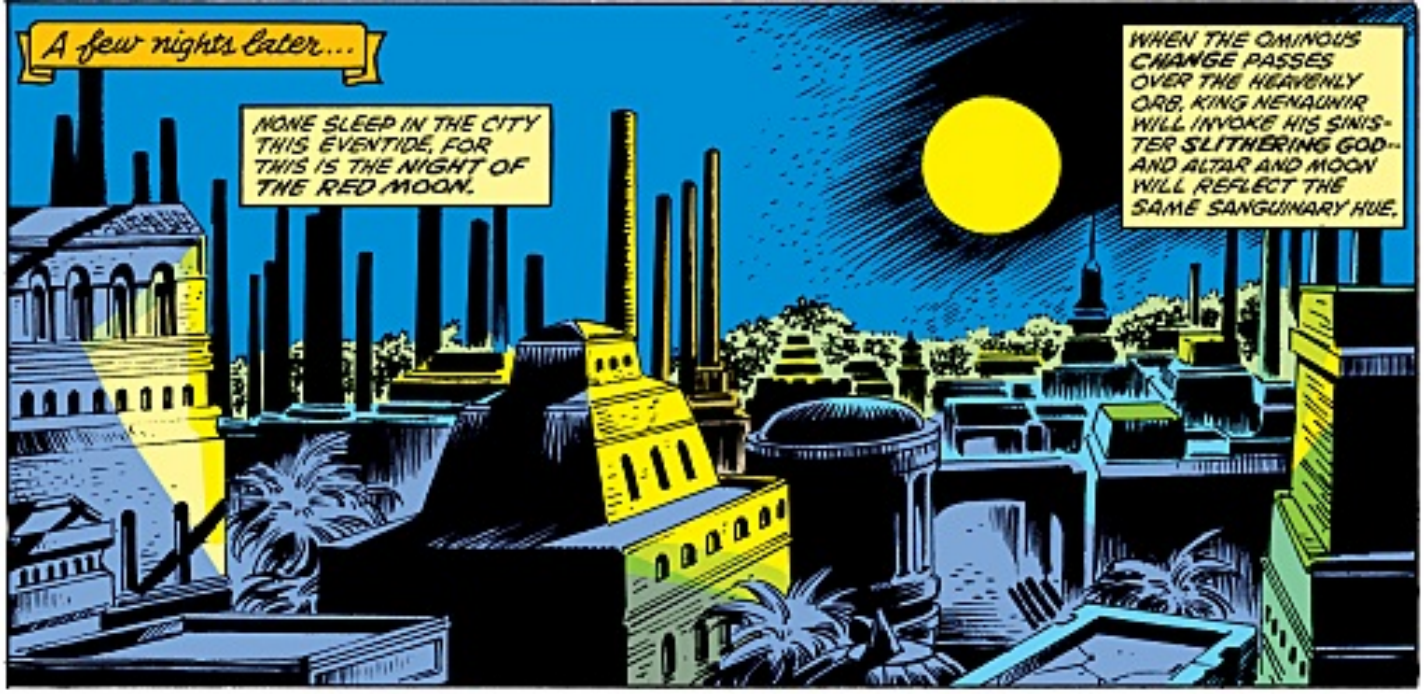
THAT WE'LL FIND OUT ONCE WE'RE WITHIN THOSE WALLS.
YOU'VE HAD MORE EXPERIENCE WITH SIEGES THAN I, GENERAL -- BUT TO ME, THOSE WALLS LOOK IMPREGNABLE.
TO AN ARMY, YES -- BUT NOT TO A LONE MAN.
YOU HAVE A PLAN, THEN?

AYE. DO YOU RECALL THE ZINGARAN NOBLE, MURZIO, WHO RIDES WITH US?
THAT SLY LITTLE TURNCOAT? WHAT OF HIM?
A WEASEL, I AGREE -- AND I'VE LONG SUSPECTED HE WAS ACTUALLY SPAWNED IN THE GUTTERS OF KORDAVA..

STILL, CONAN HAD HIS FRIEND NINUS... YOU KNOW, THAT THIEF-TURNED-PRIEST-OF-MITRA... TEACH HIM MANY TRICKS OF HIS OLD TRADE.
AND MURZIO, IT'S SAID, PROVED AN APT PUPIL.
WHAT HAS THIS TO DO WITH GETTING INTO OLD ZEMBABWEI?
THERE'S ONE UN-GUARDED GATE TO EVERY GREAT CITY, COUNT--
*SAVAGE SWORD #40. --R.T.


--ITS SEWERS!
AND, IF THERE BE ONE MAN IN OUR ARMY WHO CAN WORM HIS WAY THROUGH YONDER GRILLE, IT'S MURZIO OF ZINGARA...!


GOOD! LET'S RETURN TO CAMP AND INFORM THE NOBLE MURZIO THAT--
OH NO-- I WILL BE THE ONE TO TELL HIM, MY FRIEND.
I NEVER COULD STAND ZINGARANS!
HOURS LATER, AS A PURPLE DARKNESS SPREADS ACROSS THE WALLS AND TOWERS OF THE FORBIDDEN CITY, A SLIM, GRACEFUL FIGURE SLIPS FROM THE EDGE OF THE JUNGLE...
...TO SWIM NOISELESSLY ACROSS THE RIVER, TOWARD THE REEKING RIVULET THAT FLOWS FROM THE GRILLE BENEATH THE FROWNING WALLS.
FOR A MOMENT THE FIGURE LINGERS, SEEKING AN ENTRANCE THAT WOULD NOT EXIST FOR A MAN LESS THIN.
THEN, IT SLIDES WITHIN... AND VANISHES FROM THE SIGHT OF ANY WHO MIGHT WATCH FROM THE SHADOWS.
MURZIO MAY OR MAY NOT POSSESS THE NOBLE BLOOD HE CLAIMS.
BUT, WHEN HE SWEARS FEALTY TO A KING, HE IS THAT KING'S MAN... TO THE END.


A few nights later...
NONE SLEEP IN THE CITY THIS EVENTIDE, FOR THIS IS THE NIGHT OF THE RED MOON.
WHEN THE OMINOUS CHANGE PASSES OVER THE HEAVENLY ORB, KING NENAUNIR WILL INVOKE HIS SINISTER SLITHERING GOD... AND ALTAR AND MOON WILL REFLECT THE SAME SANGUINARY HUE.

TORCHLIT PROCESSIONS MOVE THROUGH THE NARROW, WINDING STREETS OF THE ANCIENT CITY...
...LIKE COUNTLESS FIREFLIES, DRAWN TOWARD A GREATER GLOW.

THE THUD OF DRUMS THROBS THROUGH THE HOT, BLACK AIR...
...AND WEIRD CHANTS ARISE, IN TONGUES NO WHITE OR YELLOW MAN KNOWS.

AND, THOUGH HE CANNOT SEE THE MOON FROM HIS WINDOWLESS CELL BENEATH THE STREETS OF OLD ZEMBABWE!...
...CONAN KNOWS THAT IT IS FULL.

HE AND YOUNG CONN DO NOT SPEAK OF THE DOOM TO COME-- FOR THE CIMMERIAN HAS RAISED HIS SON NOT TO WASTE WORDS.
BETTER FAR, RATHER, TO TEST ONCE MORE ONE'S STRENGTH ON THE BARS OF THE PRIMEVAL CELL--
--TO STRAIN, ONCE MORE, WITH PALMS LONG SINCE RUBBED RAW WITH TRYING--
--WITH SINEWS THAT, IF THEY ARE NOT QUITE AS POWERFUL AS ONCE THEY WERE, ARE STILL THE EQUAL OF ANY TWO MEN HE IS EVER LIKE TO MEET.
OLD AND CORRODED THE BARS ARE--YET, THEIR VERY THICKNESS HOLDS THEM IN THE PLACE THEY HAVE OCCUPIED FOR UNTOLD EONS...
ARRR
AND, THOUGH HIS EARS RING-- THOUGH HIS FACE BE CRIMSON WITH THE SUPERHUMAN EFFORT--
RRRR
--AT LAST HE MUST RELAX HIS GRIP, PANTING FOR BREATH.
THE PREHUMAN BUILDERS OF THE CELL CALCULATED WELL...
RRH
--AND EVEN NOW, THEY ARE BEYOND THE STRENGTH OF ANY MORTAL MAN TO WRENCH ASKEW.

AT THAT INSTANT--WHEN DESPAIR STANDS POISED TO TRIUMPH OVER COURAGE--
EH? WHO'S THERE?
PERHAPS IN THE LIGHT YOU'LL KNOW ME, MY LIEGE.
MURZIO! IS IT YOU--OR DO I DREAM?
HOW IN CROM'S NAME DID YOU GET IN HERE, REEKING LIKE A SEWER?
AND WHAT OF MY HOST? ARE THEY CAMPED NEARBY?
A MAN STINKS OF THE SEWER WHEN HE HAS CRAWLED THROUGH ONE, SIRE.
YOUR ARMY IS OUTSIDE THE CITY'S SOUTHERN GATE... BUT ALAS, THE WAY TO THE STREET ABOVE IS MERE TUBES, TOO NARROW EVEN FOR ME TO ENTER.
I FOLLOWED THIS SYSTEM OF PASSAGES AND FOUND YOU, MILORD. BUT I HAVE FAILED OF MY MISSION.
I CANNOT GET TO THE GATES, TO OPEN THEM FOR THE ARMY OF AQUILONIA.
AT LEAST YOU'RE HERE, MAN--AND ALL'S NOT LOST YET!
HAVE YOU A PICK-LOCK SUCH AS NINUS TAUGHT YOU TO MAKE?
ONCE OUT OF THIS CAGE, WE WOULD AT LEAST HAVE A FIGHTING CHANCE.
A PICK-LOCK? AYE...
...BUT, CONFOUND IT, FATHER NINUS HIMSELF COULD NOT SPRING THIS LOCK, SIRE.
I THINK IT ACCURSED.
THAT MAY WELL BE TRUE, MURZIO; I'D NOT PUT IT PAST THAT STYGIAN JACKAL TO HAVE ENCHANTED THE LOCK OF MY CELL!

BUT, THEN WHAT CAN--?
TRY THE LOCK ON THE CELL ACROSS THE WAY!
THE PRISONER THEREIN IS... A FRIEND, OF SORTS.
THE CHAINED MBEGA WATCHES IN IMPASSIVE SILENCE AS THE ZINGARAN SETS TO WORK ON THE LOCK OF HIS CELL... AND, ERE LONG...
IT'S OPEN, SIRE!
THANK CROM! NOW, RELEASE MBEGA-- HURRY, MAN!
UNNNHHNN--!
I'M-- SORRY FOR HOW MUCH THIS MUST HURT ONE WHO'S BEEN TORTURED AS YOU HAVE BEEN--
BUT, AT LEAST YOU'RE FREE, AND-- MITRA, BUT YOU'RE A BIG ONE!
I'LL BE ABLE-- TO STAND ON MY OWN-- IN A MOMENT.
NOT TO BE DISRESPECTFUL-- BUT I'LL BE GLAD FOR THAT.
WELL DONE! YOU ZEMBABWANS BUILT A STOUT CELL DOOR-- BUT NO MATTER.
WHAT CANNOT BE CURED MUST BE ENDURED.
BUT... YOU FACE DEATH...
NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME, MY FRIEND.
WHAT MORE CAN I DO, MY LIEGE?
FIRST, SLIP ME YOUR PONIARD.
THE ZEMBABWANS HAVE STRIPPED ME NIGH NAKED...

...BUT AT LEAST THEY LEFT ME MY BOOTS.
CONAN... I KNOW THE WAY OUT OF THIS DUNGEON...
GOOD! HELP HIM, ZINGARAN.
MBEGA, THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE! IF YOUR FOLLOWERS CAN RISE BEFORE THE HOUR OF SACRIFICE AND OPEN THE SOUTH GATE TO MY ARMY, WE MAY YET OUTLIVE THE DAWN!
I SHALL DO... WHAT I CAN, MY NORTHERN FRIEND...!
AND NOW, AT LAST, FATHER SPEAKS TO SON...
BE OF GOOD CHEER, CONN.
ONE FRIEND WITHIN THE WALLS IS WORTH TEN THOUSAND LOCKED OUTSIDE THEM.
REMEMBER THAT ALWAYS.
I WILL, SIRE... ALWAYS.

SOON, THE TWO ROYAL CAPTIVES ARE ESCORTED BOUND FROM THE PITS BY A PARTY OF BLACK WARRIORS... AND OUT INTO THE GREAT PLAZA BETWEEN PALACE AND TEMPLE.
ALREADY THE FULL MOON RIDES HIGH IN THE SKY, ITS BRILLIANT LIGHT RENDERING THE STARS FEW AND WAN.

BUT NEITHER MOON NOR STARS NOR EVEN BLINDING SUN WILL EVER SHINE SO BRIGHTLY, IN CONAN'S STEEL-BLUE EYES, AS DOES HIS OWN OFFSPRING IN THIS TIME OF TRIAL.
WERE THE BOY NOT HIS OWN, NOR EVEN A PRINCE, THE CIMMERIAN CAN THINK OF NONE HE WOULD STAND BESIDE MORE PROUDLY.
NOW, KING AND HEIR STAND BEFORE THE GLYPH-CARVED TEMPLE OF DAMBALLAH...

...WHERE A STRANGE ALTAR OF BLACK MARBLE WAITS, BEFORE A SINISTER SERPENT-IDOL CARVED OF NIGHT-DARK BASALT, WITH GREAT RUBIES FOR EYES.
SET--OR DAMBALLAH, AS THE ZEMBABWANS CALL THEIR SO-CALLED "SLITHERING GOD."
CROM...!

SWIFTLY, BOTH CAPTIVES ARE CHAINED AT THE BOTTOM OF THE BOWL-ALTAR...

...WHILE, ACROSS THE SQUARE, THE WASTED FIGURE OF THOTH-AMON STANDS BESIDE KING NENAUNIR.
THE SILENCE LENGTHENS, BROKEN ONLY BY THE MOAN OF THE NIGHT WIND OF THE NEARBY JUNGLE.

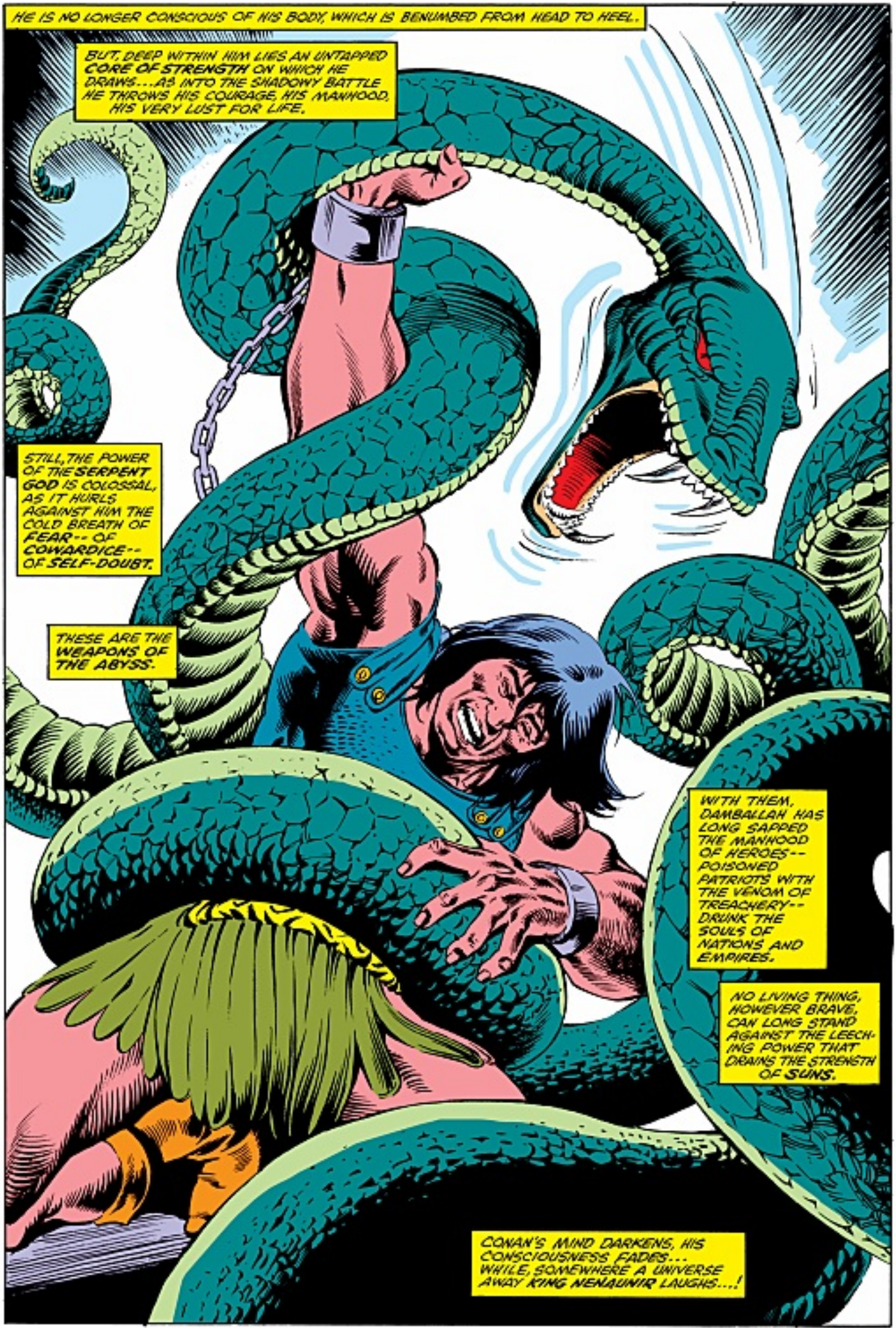
THEN, AS THOUSANDS OF HEADS TURN UPWARD, WITH DRAWN-OUT SIGHS--
--A RED SHADOW WITH A CURVED EDGE BEGINS TO CREEP ACROSS THE FACE OF THE FULL MOON.
NOR COULD ANY MAN SAY WHENCE IT CAME.

FATHER--!
YES, LAD--I KNOW! IT'S TIME TO ACT.
THESE CHAINS--AND THE WRIST-CUFFS--ARE MADE OF NEW BRONZE, THAT NO MAN'S SINEWS COULD BREAK--

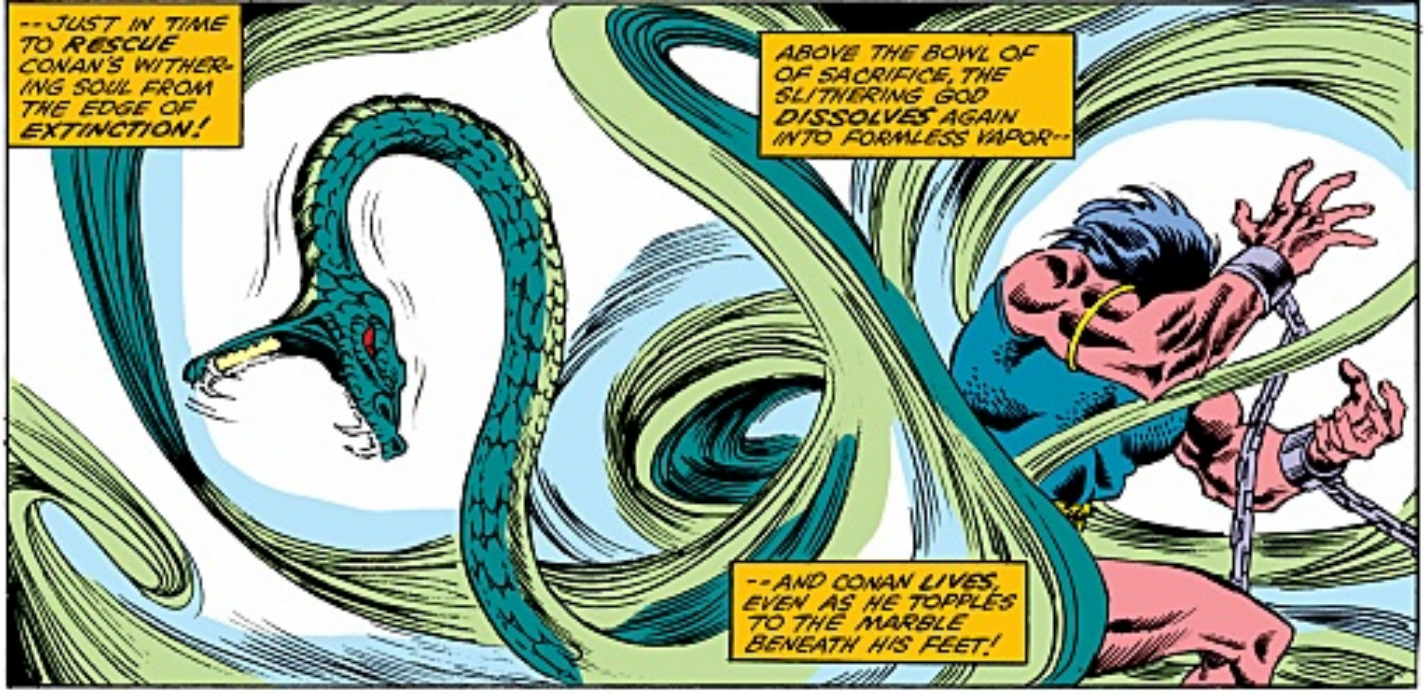
BUT, THE RING SET IN THE MARBLE IS-- UNNNNH!-- WEAK FROM CENTURIES OF RUST--
--LIKE THE BARS-- OF OUR CELL--
--AND NOWHERE NEAR AS THICK!
HAH!
NOW-- GOT TO GET THE OTHER ARM FREE-- BEFORE THOSE DOGS LOOK DOWN-- AND SEE US!
:UNNNFFH!:
AT ANY SECOND, THE WARRIOR-KING HAS EXPECTED TO FEEL A JAVELIN STRIKE HIS BROAD BACK...
YET NOW, AS HE TURNS HIS EYES FOR AN INSTANT TOWARD THE ZEMBABWANS NEARBY...
...HE SEES THAT THEY ARE MERELY WATCHING HIM FREE HIMSELF, WITH STOLIDLY INDIFFERENT FACES.
AND EVEN AS HE LOOKS, THE DRUMMING CHANGES ITS BEAT...
...AND A BOOMING CHANT ARISES FROM THE MASSED THOUSANDS.
DON'T WASTE TIME FREEING ME, FATHER! YOU MUST--
I MUST FREE MY SON-- OR I'M NO MAN, LIVE OR DIE!
SIRE--THAT CHILL-- LIKE AN ICY WIND ON US! WHAT--?
I SHOULD HAVE GUESSED!
THOSE STEAMY VAPORS-- CONDENSING BENEATH THE MOON-- THEY'RE TAKING ON FORM-- SUBSTANCE--

DAMBALLAH HIMSELF IS MATERIALIZING ON THIS EARTHLY PLANE--TO CRUSH US TO A PULP!
THERE! YOU'RE FREE, CONN! NOW TO--
FATHER!
RUN, BOY! THE GATES!
SAVE YOURSELF--AND TRY TO LET THE ARMY IN!
IF THE FATHER OF ALL EVIL IS GOING TO FEED ON MY SOUL--
--HE'LL FIND MY BLADE AS COLD AS HIS COILS!
YET, THOUGH CONAN DRIVES THE DAGGER DEEP INTO THE SERPENT'S WRITHING SCALES, HIS BLOWS DO NOT SEEM TO HURT THE APPARITION SLOWLY SOLIDIFYING ABOUT HIM...
...AS DAMBALLAH'S WEDGE-SHAPED HEAD SWAYS AGAINST THE BURNING MOON, WHILE EYES OF SCARLET FLAME LOCK INTO HIS OWN!

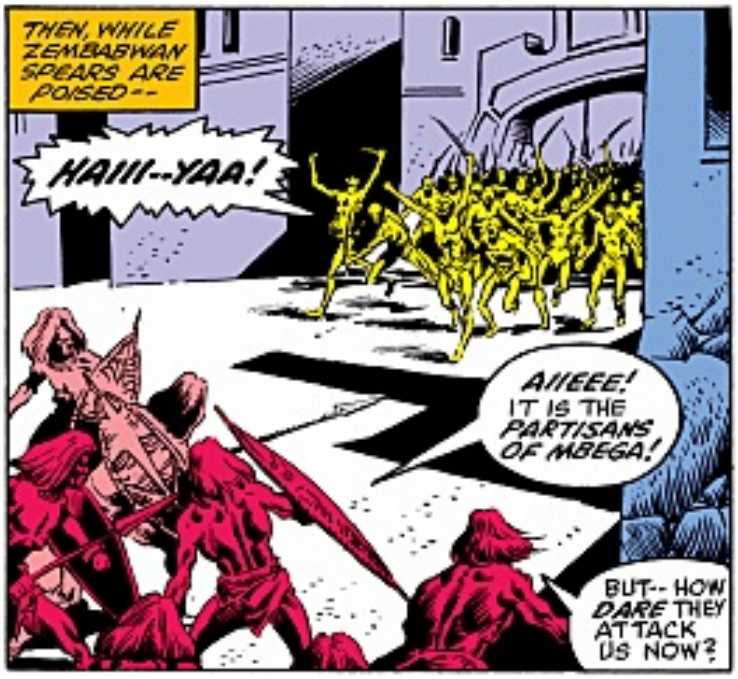
A CRUEL, MALIGNANT INTELLIGENCE LIES BEHIND THOSE REPTILIAN EYES--
--A VAST WEARINESS, AN ENDLESS DESPAIR-- AND A BOTTOMLESS HUNGER.
CONAN'S SOUL QUAILS AS HE STARES INTO THE EYES OF A DEMON THAT, FOR A MILLION YEARS, HAS STRIVEN TO TRAMPLE HIS RACE BACK INTO THE MUD FROM WHICH IT HAS SLOWLY, PAINFULLY EMERGED.
THE COLD IS BONE-DEEP NOW... THE WEIGHT OF THE SERPENT'S BODY CRUSHING...
=UNNHH--!?
...THE PRESSURE OF ITS SHIFTING COILS NUMBING, AS THEY TIGHTEN VISELIKE ON HIS CHEST--
--TILL HIS PONIARD FALLS LIMPLY UPON THE MARBLE.
IT SEEMS TO CONAN THAT HIS MIND, HIS WILL, AND HIS SOUL NOW FORM AN EXTENSION OF HIS BODY--
YET, CONAN FIGHTS ON-- AND NO LONGER IS IT A MERE STRUGGLE OF FLESH WITH FLESH--
--BUT A BATTLE OF INDOMITABLE WILLS, ON SOME ALIEN PLANE OF CONSCIOUSNESS!
--AS HE THROWS THE VIGOR OF HIS UNBROKEN WILL AGAINST THE SPIRITUAL NEGATIVITY OF THE SERPENT-DEMON--
--MUCH AS HE MIGHT HURL A SPEAR OR WAR-AXE AGAINST A FOE OF FLESH AND BLOOD.


HE IS NO LONGER CONSCIOUS OF HIS BODY, WHICH IS BENUMBED FROM HEAD TO HEEL.
BUT, DEEP WITHIN HIM LIES AN UNTAPPED CORE OF STRENGTH ON WHICH HE DRAWS...AS INTO THE SHADOWY BATTLE HE THROWS HIS COURAGE, HIS MANHOOD, HIS VERY LUST FOR LIFE.
STILL, THE POWER OF THE SERPENT GOD IS COLOSSAL, AS IT HURLS AGAINST HIM THE COLD BREATH OF FEAR -- OF COWARDICE -- OF SELF-DOUBT.
THESE ARE THE WEAPONS OF THE ABYSS.
WITH THEM, DAMBALLAH HAS LONG SAPPED THE MANHOOD OF HEROES -- POISONED PATRIOTS WITH THE VENOM OF TREACHERY -- DRUNK THE SOULS OF NATIONS AND EMPIRES.
NO LIVING THING, HOWEVER BRAVE, CAN LONG STAND AGAINST THE LEECHING POWER THAT DRAINS THE STRENGTH OF SUNS.
CONAN'S MIND DARKENS, HIS CONSCIOUSNESS FADES... WHILE, SOMEWHERE A UNIVERSE AWAY KING MENAUNIR LAUGHS...!

AND THAT GROSS, INHUMAN LAUGHTER STIRS INTO ACTION ONE WHO HAS, TILL NOW, STOOD NUMB WITH SHOCK:
PRINCE CONN, WHO HAS NOT FLED AS ORDERED BY HIS FATHER--
-- BUT WHO NOW RETRIEVES THE DAGGER FALLEN FROM HIS MIGHTY SIRE'S HAND --
-- AND LOOKS ABOUT FOR A PLACE TO SHEATHE IT.
HIS QUICK MIND TELLS HIM THAT AGAINST THE COILS OF DAMBALLAH IT WILL BE TOO LITTLE... AND FAR TOO LATE.
BUT, THERE IS ANOTHER WHO CAN BE REACHED-- ONE WHO IS MORTAL, FOR ALL HIS SORCEROUS POWER:
KING NENAUNIR!
WEAPON IN HAND, CONN FLINGS HIMSELF TOWARD WHERE THE ZEMBABWAN STANDS, EYES ABLAZE WITH BLOOD-LUST AND TRIUMPH.
ONLY THOTH-AMON STANDS CLOSE ENOUGH PERHAPS TO PREVENT HIM --
-- BUT THE STYGIAN STAYS HIS HAND AN INSTANT, TORN 'TWIXT JEALOUSY AND PRUDENCE--
-- AND THAT IS LONG ENOUGH!
WHAT--?
AAAAAAAAAA
AS THE DAGGER PIERCES NENAUNIR'S HEART, THE SPELL THAT SUSTAINS DAMBALLAH ON THE EARTHLY PLANE IS BROKEN --


--JUST IN TIME TO RESCUE CONAN'S WITHERING SOUL FROM THE EDGE OF EXTINCTION!
ABOVE THE BOWL OF OF SACRIFICE, THE SLITHERING GOD DISSOLVES AGAIN INTO FORMLESS VAPOR--
--AND CONAN LIVES, EVEN AS HE TOPPLES TO THE MARBLE BENEATH HIS FEET!

SLAY THE MURDERING WHELP WHERE HE STANDS!
NO! SAVE HIM-- FOR THE TORTURER!
DO WHATEVER YOU WANT!
YOU WON'T BRING THAT MAD DOG BACK TO LIFE!


THEN, WHILE ZEMBABWAN SPEARS ARE POISED--
HAIII--YAA!
AIIEEE! IT IS THE PARTISANS OF MBEGA!
BUT-- HOW DARE THEY ATTACK US NOW?

THE QUESTION HANGS IN THE AIR, UNANSWERED-- AS THE CHARGING SPEARMEN STRIKE AT THE WORSHIPPERS OF DAMBALLAH FROM ALL SIDES.
THE DENSE, ORDERLY LINES OF NENAUNIR'S MEN SWIFTLY MELT INTO CHAOS--
--AS, LEADERLESS AND EASILY DISTINGUISHABLE BY THEIR PLUMED HEADDRESSES, THE FOLLOWERS OF NENAUNIR GO DOWN BY SCORES!

AS FOR KING CONAN:
ONE MOMENT, HE SEEMS TO SEE THE RED MOON LEERING DOWN-- AND HEAR KING NENAUNIR'S SATANIC LAUGH ECHOING THROUGH AN ABYSS OF NOTHINGNESS...

THE NEXT, THE DEATHLY COLD THAT NUMBS HIS BODY LESSENS.., THE CRUSHING PRESSURE LIGHTENS...
...AND HE OPENS WEARY EYES...

...TO SEE THE LAST REMNANTS OF THE SLITHERING GOD VANISHING ABOVE HIS HEAD.
WHAT'S-- GOING ON--?

HE TURNS HIS HEAD AT THE SOUND OF A GREAT UPROAR..
--AND BEHOLDS WHAT MUST BE THE FOLLOWERS OF MBEGA, BATTLING WITH THE PARTISANS OF NENAUNIR.

NENAUNIR! EVEN AS HE STRUGGLES DIZZILY TO RISE, VENGEFUL EYES ALREADY SEEK OUT THAT VILE SERVANT OF DAMBALLAH.
THEN, ONLY A FEW PACES FROM THE EDGE OF THE MARBLE BOWL, HE BEHOLDS:
MANTLE OF MITRA!

THE CORPSE OF KING NENAUNIR-- STRUCK DOWN IN HIS HOUR OF TRIUMPH--
--MURZIO'S PONIARD GLEAMING IN HIS BREAST.

HIS FULL STRENGTH NOT YET RETURNED, HE IS FORCING HIMSELF ERECT, TO JOIN THE BLOODY FRAY--
--WHEN HIS OWN AQUILONIANS ARRIVE, TO TIP THE TOPPLING SCALES OF BATTLE.
FOR KING CONAN-- AND YOUNG PRINCE CONN!
MOMENTS LATER, THE SQUARE RESOUNDS WITH THE CLATTER OF DROPPED WEAPONS...
...AS THOSE WHO REMAIN ALIVE OF NENAUNIR'S MEN SURRENDER, SEEING FURTHER STRUGGLES USELESS.
THEN, AS CONAN STANDS ON HALF-NUMB LEGS...
OH, FATHER-- FATHER-- I KILLED NENAUNIR--! THE SNAKE-GOD WAS GOING TO KILL YOU-- I GRABBED THE KNIFE, AND--
EASY, LAD...
IT'S ALL OVER NOW, AND YOU'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT THE FIRST MAN EVER YOU SLEW... WAS A KING.
BUT, IT APPEARS I WAS WRONG WHEN I SAID TO THOTH-AMON THAT OUR FINAL BATTLE WOULD BE FOUGHT AMONG THE TOPLESS TOWERS...
FOR, THERE HE GOES NOW-- NOR CAN ANY MAN STAY HIS PATH!

THE WYVERN IS BEARING HIM... SOUTH.
SOUTH: WHERE LIES NAUGHT BUT JUNGLE, AND THE EDGE OF THE KNOWN WORLD ITSELF.
THE STYGIAN MAGE IS ALONE NOW, HAVING LOST EVEN THE FAVOR OF HIS MERCILESS GOD.
WHERE ELSE CAN HE GO?
COME, BOY... LET'S FIND PALLANTIDES AND TROCERO... AYE, AND THAT SLY ROGUE MURZIO, WHOM I THINK I'LL MAKE A BARON!
BY DAWN, I'LL HAVE CROWNED MBEGA WITH MY OWN HANDS.
THEN, THE ARMY WILL REST HERE A WHILE, LICKING ITS WOUNDS.
AND THEN, SIRE?
HAH! YOU KNOW WHAT THEN MUST FOLLOW, CONN.
THEN IT'S SOUTH-- SOUTH TO THE WORLD'S EDGE, WHERE ON A NAMELESS BEACH THAT FRONTS AN UNKNOWN SEA, I'LL CLOSE WITH THOTH-AMON FOR THE ULTIMATE BATTLE!
CROM, BUT IT FEELS GOOD TO BE ALIVE!!
NEXT: SHADOWS IN THE SKULL!
CIMMERIAN VS. STYGIAN -- TO THE DEATH!

KING CONAN

c/o MARVEL COMICS GROUP
575 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022

ROY THOMAS
EDITOR
MARK GRUENWALD
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Roy T., John B., and Ernie C.,

This is the first letter I've written to Marvel in some eighteen years of enjoying your comics, the first seven years of my life necessarily being used to learn *how* to read. My wife and I have gradually become Marvel addicts, reading most of your titles faithfully, and especially CONAN THE BARBARIAN, SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN, and now KING CONAN, the stimulus for this letter. If it seems to be a little heavy on the compliments, all three of you are to blame. You just put too much quality in KING CONAN #1 for me *not* to respond.

I was apprehensive that "The Witch of the Mists" would reveal the greying king who was so painful for me to read about in the de Camp and Carter volume. Thank you for keeping him mature, wise, and yet still full of power and stamina. I'll never forget the sadness I felt seeing Willie Mays miss catching a fly ball, not because of lack of desire or talent, but just because of legs that had lost their fleetness. There was nothing I could do for him, but with my thanks to you goes the request that Conan does not lose the vitality that my paunch can only envy. You've captured him in this first story just as I hoped.

Roy, I'd shell out my shekels for a novel by you anyday. Your writing has a flowing realism that adds believability in Conan's hard-to-believe world. And your adeptness at handling the Cimmerian's personality at three different ages in his life is done with care. I guess if all I wrote was, "You care!" it would save a lot of time, but I'm cooking now. Whatever the literary powers-that-be may say, I'll lay odds that your novel would surpass anything written about Conan to date by deCamp, Carter, Nyberg, Offutt, or even Wagner. There are a lot of us non-letter-writers who thank you for the job well done.

Without shorting the unquestionable talent of Barry Smith during his Conan days, I still consider John Buscema to be the premier artist in capturing the intensity of emotion and strength that is the lifeblood of Conan. And he ain't no slouch on the bad guys, either. His demons and sorcerers have made me squirm more than once.

If I may second-guess Robert E. Howard, I think he would be proud of all three of you.

James A. Harrell
Augusta, GA 30912

We'd like to think so ourselves, James — and we're truly proud and happy that KING CONAN #1 brought you out of the cultural closet, so to speak. Incidentally, though there were too many prose hands already in the Conan pie for co-writers Roy Thomas and Gerry Conway to get a chance at a novel starring the Cimmerian swashbuckler, REH literary agent liked the guys' first few chapters well enough to suggest that they turn it into a King Kull novel instead. That required more work than just changing a few names, of course, but they're hard at work on it, and who knows--maybe one of these days...! —R.T.

Dear Editor:

Having just read KING CONAN #1, I thought I'd toss a few random thoughts at you.

(1) This mag is only going to be published quarterly? With Conan's popularity, I thought that we'd see it as a bi-monthly, at least. On the positive side, though, this should ensure that there are no continued stories, since a three-month wait is quite a bit to ask the readers to sit through.

(2) I realize that you'll be adapting some already-written King Conan tales, but I ask you to keep the following in mind when you are working on original material. This mag should feature only stories that could have happened to *King* Conan — *i.e.*, stories that make use of the fact that he is older, a king, etc. Otherwise, it might just as well have been a "regular" Conan epic, and we already get a lot of those, however good they may be.

(3) King Conan does not look, act, or talk like a man who is "pushing sixty years of age," as you say. Sure, he's a remarkable man and maybe he's "young for his age," but his depiction here is unrealistically so. I understand that you didn't give him a beard, etc., so that he'd be instantly recognizable as Conan (thus enhancing the mag's sales appeal), but some alterations are called for. (But, come to think of it, if you make him "look his age" in future issues, then he will appear older than he was in #1, thus upsetting the time continuity. So I guess any changes along this line will have to be in other than his physical appearance.)

(4) Why is King Conan red-skinned and his son totally white-skinned? Problems with subtle coloring?

T.M. Maple
Toronto, Canada

Here, good neighbor, are a few random answers:

(1) If sales hold up along the lines established by preliminary returns of issue #1, it's probably only a matter of time till KING CONAN is bi-monthly.

(2) Precisely what we have in mind. Let us know if we succeed from issue #9 on, when we'll be doing new, unadapted tales.

(3) We've asked new embellisher Danny Bulanadi, formerly an assistant to SAVAGE SWORD artist Tony DeZuniga, to leave a bit more gray in Conan's hair this issue, to see how that works out. What do you think?

(4) Yep. Conan's skin is supposed to be "bronzed," and the color we use is what we decided upon as the closest approximation of it. Conn, being Zenobia's son also, is rather paler... but who knows? Maybe he'll get a suntan as he gets older. —R.T.

Dear Conan-People,

A few comments and suggestions. Firstly, the title: KING CONAN. I think CONAN THE KING sounds better, and it'll be less confusing when you bring back KING KULL. (You *are* bringing him back, aren't you?) Conan's resemblance to Kull in this issue is distracting and probably confusing to newer readers. Why? Well, look at Conan's hair! It's shorter in this book than in his other. That in itself is no big deal, but it's the same length that Kull wears his in nearly every illustrated appearance.

Also, I don't agree with the decision to keep Conan clean-shaven. I can see not putting a full beard on him because it limits the artists' facial expressions, but I think a mustache is definitely in order. One of my reasons is a personal one: I have a mustache, too, and if it's good enough for me, it's good enough for Conan! I think Conan should have a few more lines on his face, too, if he's to look as though he's "pushing sixty" as you say he is.

Other than that, I don't have much complaint on the issue as it stands. I do hope you adapt *Conan of the Isles* in this title. It's about my favorite of the de Camp/Carter stories.

Roger S. Payton
Hymera, IN 47855

***Isles* is scheduled to be adapted, in part, in the forthcoming 1980 CONAN ANNUAL, Roger--rather than *Conan the Avenger*, as previously announced, which will become KING CONAN #5-8.**

We agree with you about the "more-lines" thing, and we hope to work on it with Danny Bulanadi. As for the beard-or-no-beard controversy and its mustachioed offshoots, suffice it to say that letter-writers (admittedly always a minority of readers, but a very *passionate* minority) seem about equally divided on the matter. So who knows? King Conan may yet grow a beard.

We have no plans to bring back Kull as the lead feature of a mag, though, so King Conan — shorter hair and all, as would befit a barbarian become a monarch in Aquilonia — won't have any competition there. Look for a Roy Thomas-Alfredo Alcala collaboration on a King Kull story in our $1.25 companion magazine SAVAGE SWORD any month now, though. You'll be able to tell them apart by Kull's scar (initiated by Roy and Ross Andru, first artist of KULL THE CONQUEROR), if by no other way. If this doesn't seem quite enough, visually speaking, just remember that the first Conan story was a rewritten Kull story — so it's a problem that's nearly fifty years old!

Oh, and incidentally, Ye Editor/Writer must admit: Besides liking the name KING CONAN better aesthetically, partly because it is, after all, REH's own term for Conan as sovereign, Jim Shooter and I felt that it was better if the three Marvel-published Conan mags had titles which began with different letters. Such are the vicissitudes of publishing.

—R.T.

COVER PENCILER: JOHN BUSCEMA

COVER INKER: ERNIE CHAN

"Know, O prince, that the man called Conan was all things in his day: a thief, a reaver, a slayer... fierce sellsword and fiercer pirate... and finally, usurper king of proud, civilized Aquilonia, mightiest of Hyborian kingdoms... with his queen Zenobia at his side, and his son Prince Conn ripe to carry on the legend..."

—*The Nemedian Chronicles.*

Stan Lee PRESENTS: **KING CONAN**

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD

SHADOWS IN THE SKULL!

ADAPTED FROM THE STORY BY L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & LIN CARTER

FEATURING THE HERO CREATED BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

IN THE HEART OF ZEMBABWEI, CONAN OF AQUILONIA AND THE NEWLY-CROWNED KING MBEGA BASK ANXIOUSLY IN THE CRIMSON GLOW OF SMOLDERING COALS AS RIMUSH, ROYAL SOOTHSAYER OF THIS BLACK KINGDOM, COMPLETES HIS MYSTIC LIBATIONS...

BY THROBBING HEART OF IBIS... BY THE ADDER'S FORKED TONGUE... BY THE BLOOD OF THE BULL-APE...

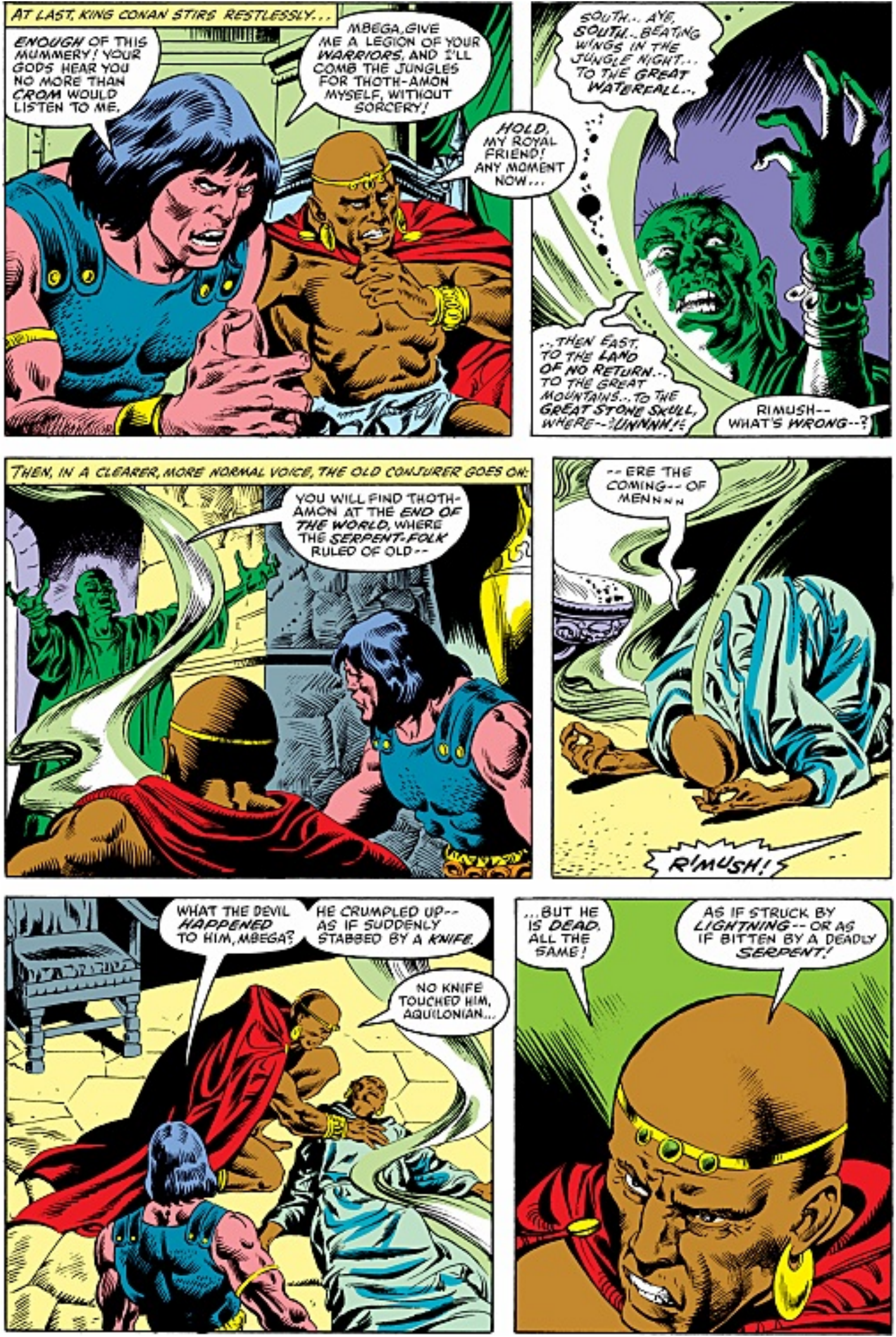
...SHOW US, O GODS OF ZEMBABWEI, WHITHER HAS FLED THE STYGIAN WIZARD THOTH-AMON, MOST EVIL MAGE OF ALL...!

ROY THOMAS * JOHN BUSCEMA
WRITER/EDITOR — ARTIST/ILLUSTRATOR

DANNY BULANADI
INKER/EMBELLISHER

JOE ROSEN, LETTERER & ROUSSOS COLORIST

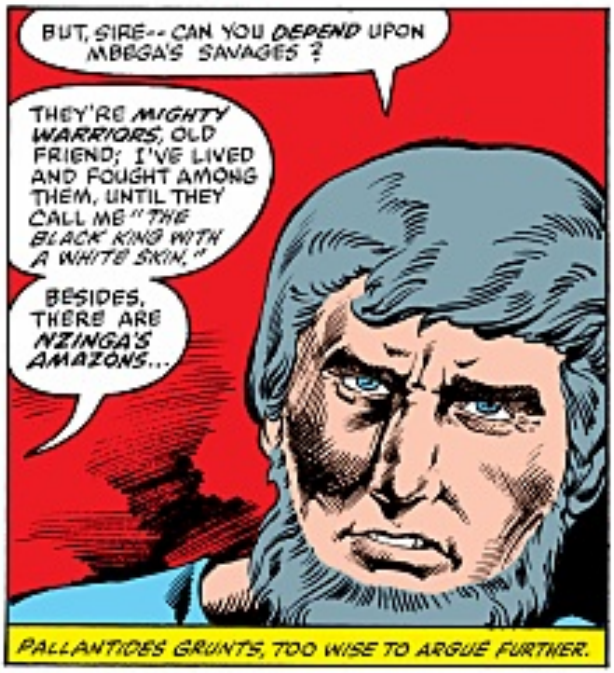
JIM SHOOTER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF


AT LAST, KING CONAN STIRS RESTLESSLY...
ENOUGH OF THIS MUMMERY! YOUR GODS HEAR YOU NO MORE THAN CROM WOULD LISTEN TO ME.
MBEGA, GIVE ME A LEGION OF YOUR WARRIORS, AND I'LL COMB THE JUNGLES FOR THOTH-AMON MYSELF, WITHOUT SORCERY!
HOLD, MY ROYAL FRIEND! ANY MOMENT NOW...
SOUTH... AYE, SOUTH... BEATING WINGS IN THE JUNGLE NIGHT... TO THE GREAT WATERFALL...
...THEN EAST, TO THE LAND OF NO RETURN... TO THE GREAT MOUNTAINS... TO THE GREAT STONE SKULL, WHERE--?UNNNH!?
RIMUSH-- WHAT'S WRONG--?
THEN, IN A CLEARER, MORE NORMAL VOICE, THE OLD CONJURER GOES ON:
YOU WILL FIND THOTH-AMON AT THE END OF THE WORLD, WHERE THE SERPENT-FOLK RULED OF OLD--
--ERE THE COMING-- OF MENNNN
R'MUSH!
WHAT THE DEVIL HAPPENED TO HIM, MBEGA?
HE CRUMPLED UP-- AS IF SUDDENLY STABBED BY A KNIFE.
NO KNIFE TOUCHED HIM, AQUILONIAN...
...BUT HE IS DEAD, ALL THE SAME!
AS IF STRUCK BY LIGHTNING-- OR AS IF BITTEN BY A DEADLY SERPENT!

SOON AFTERWARD...
HEAD OF NERGAL, SIRE-- I WON'T HEAR OF IT!
I'LL NOT HAVE YOU LARKING OFF INTO THE JUNGLES ALONE WITHOUT A COMPANY OF STOUT AQUILONIANS AT YOUR BACK!

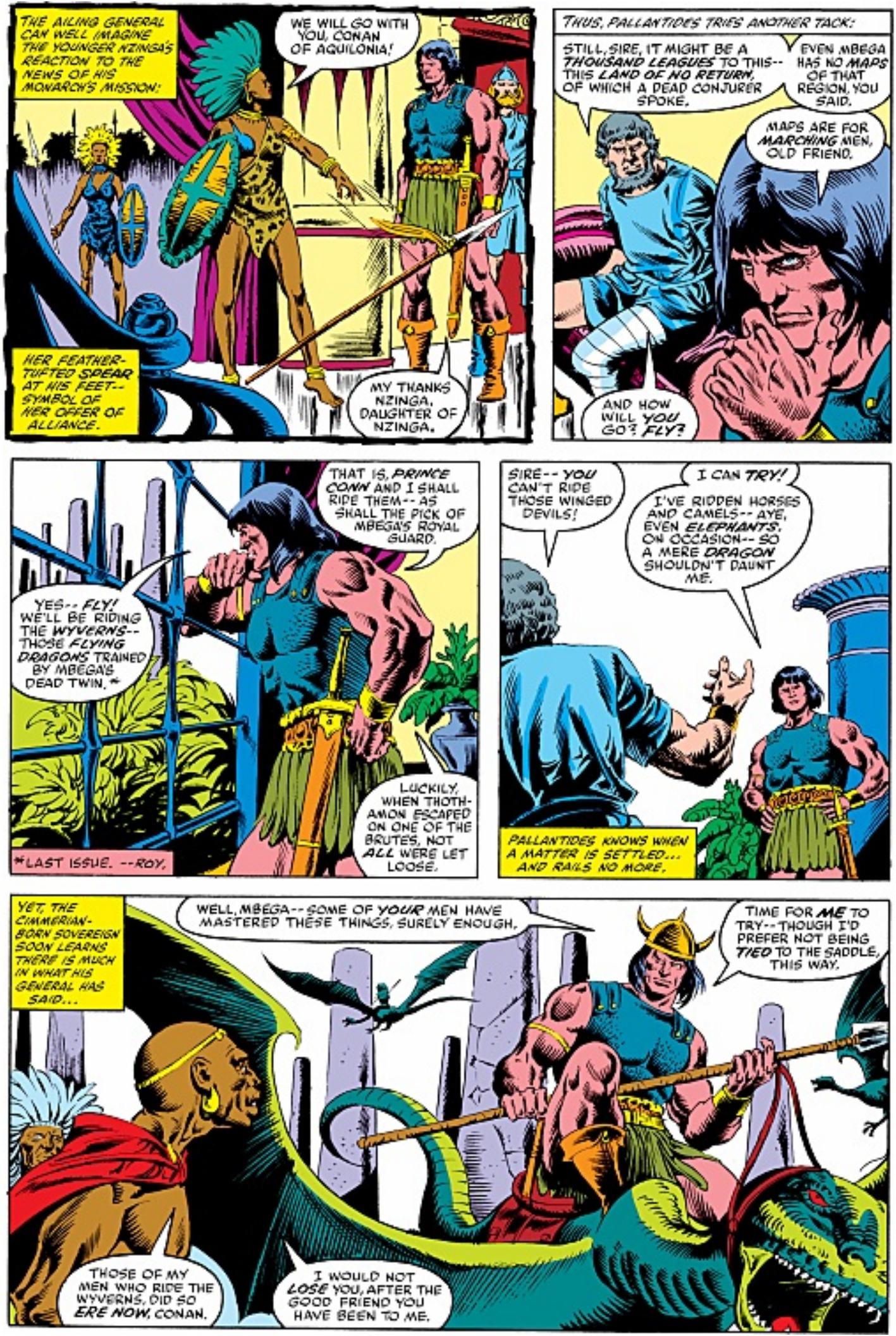
PERHAPS I CAN'T MARCH WITH THIS ACCURSED LEG, BUT I CAN RIDE, AT LEAST...!
NO, PALLANTIDES! YOU, LIKE YOUR OWN SOLDIERS, ARE WASTED BY WOUNDS AND FEVER-- AND I CAN'T WAIT FOR YOU TO RECOVER.
KING MBEGA HAS OFFERED ME THE PICK OF HIS TROOPS...

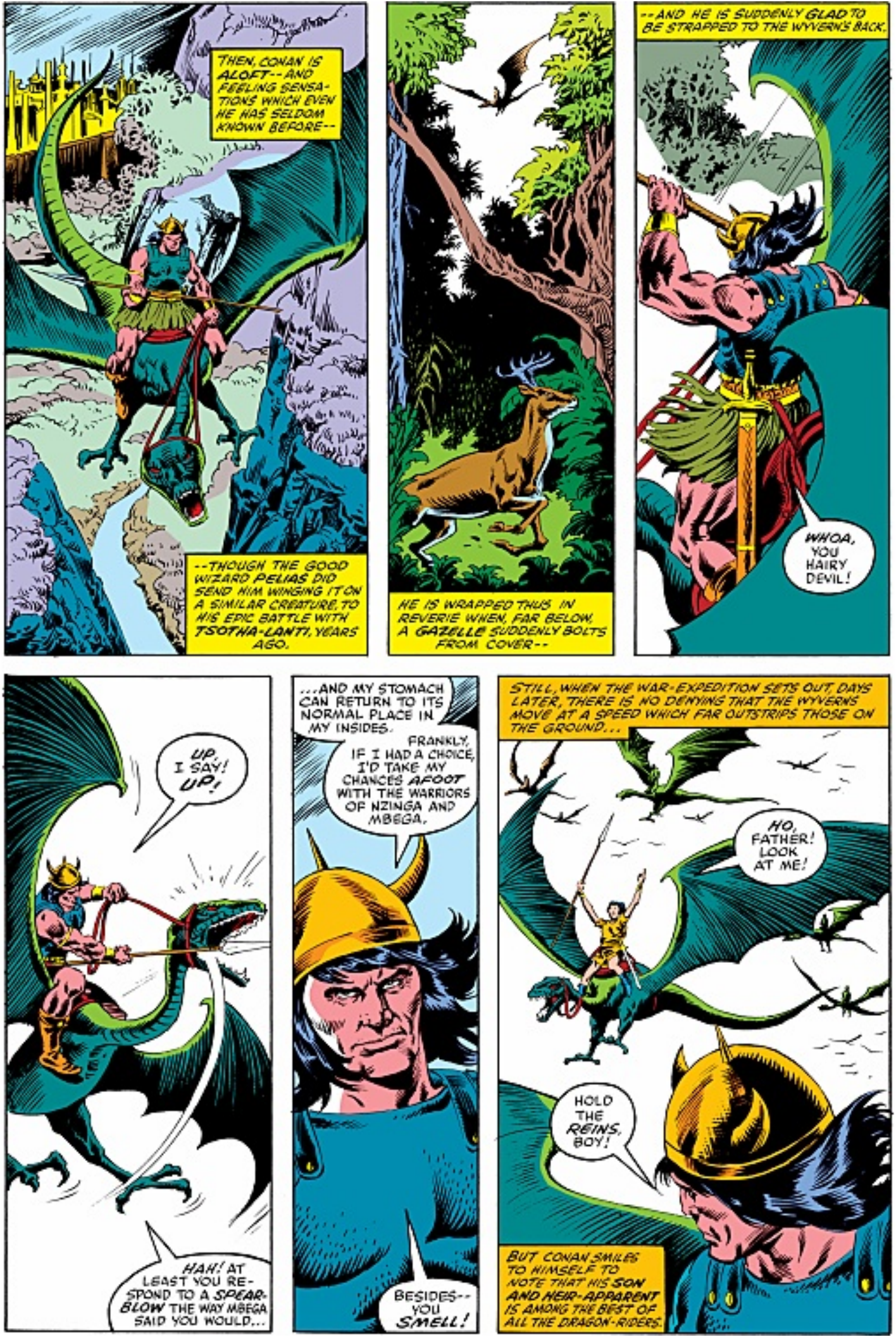
BESIDES, IF I STAY HERE IN ZEMBABWEI MUCH LONGER, THOTH-AMON MAY HAVE CREPT BACK TO THE SAFETY OF HIS STYGIAN LAIR-- PERHAPS EVEN FLED TO VENDHYA OR KHITAI, OR THE WORLD'S EDGE, FOR ALL I KNOW!
THE OLD DEVIL HASN'T LOST ALL HIS MAGIC, EVEN IF WE DID DEFEAT HIM AND HIS ALLIES.*
*LAST ISSUE. --ROY.

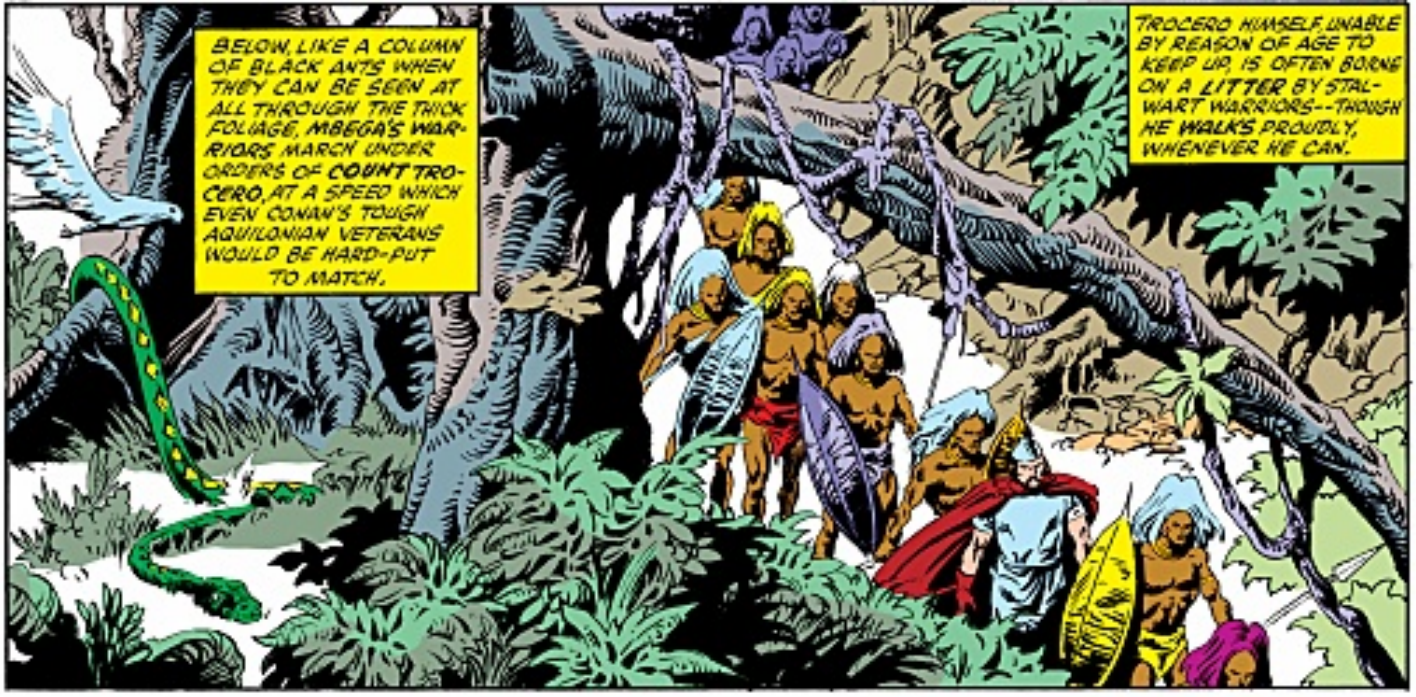

BUT, SIRE-- CAN YOU DEPEND UPON MBEGA'S SAVAGES ?
THEY'RE MIGHTY WARRIORS, OLD FRIEND; I'VE LIVED AND FOUGHT AMONG THEM, UNTIL THEY CALL ME "THE BLACK KING WITH A WHITE SKIN."
BESIDES, THERE ARE NZINGA'S AMAZONS...
PALLANTIDES GRUNTS, TOO WISE TO ARGUE FURTHER.

HE KNOWS THAT, MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS AGO, CONAN-- THEN A ZINGARAN BUCCANEER-- HAD VISITED THE COUNTRY OF THE BLACK QUEEN NZINGA.
THEY HAD SHARED THE MUTUAL RESPECT OF SWORN FOES... AND PASSIONATE WARRIORS.*
*SEE SAVAGE SWORD #41. --R.T.

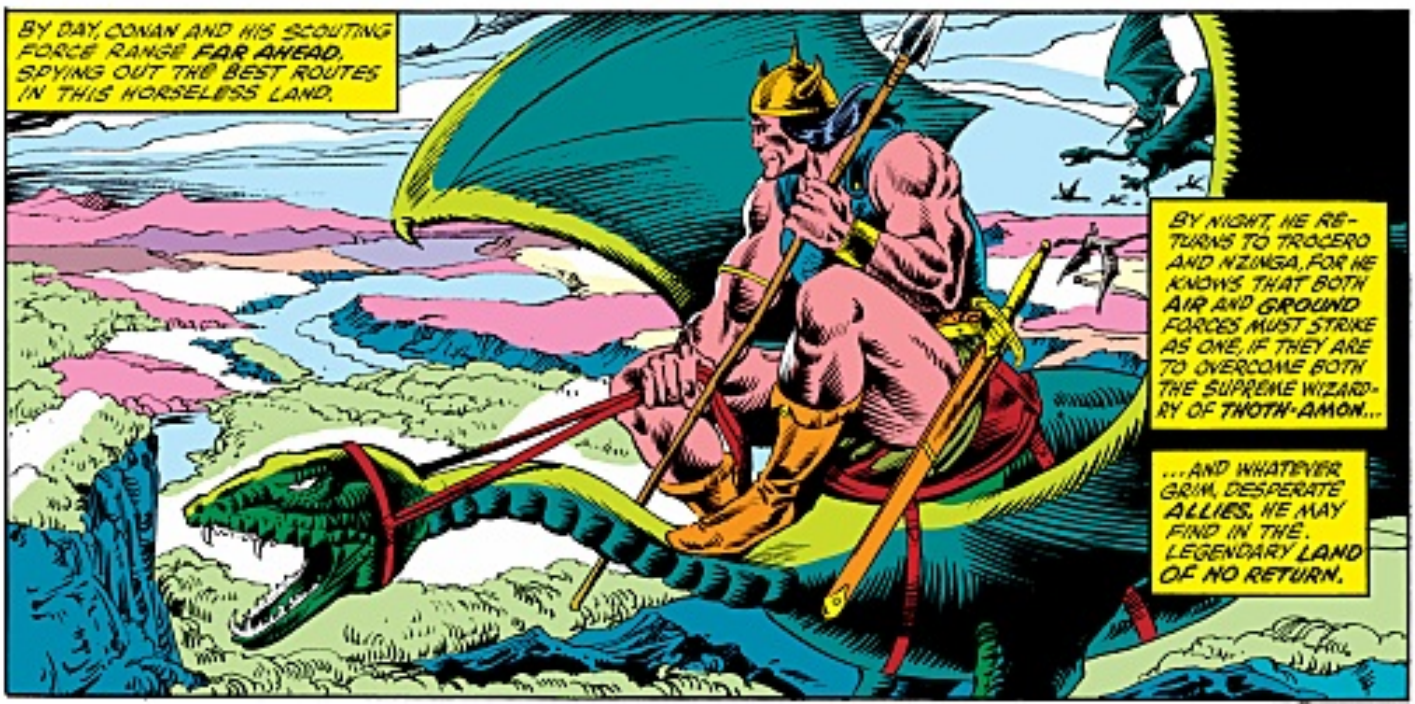
AND NOW, JUST A WEEK PAST, A COMPANY OF BLACK AMAZONS HAD APPEARED IN ZEMBABWEI, TO REPRESENT THEIR QUEEN AT MBEGA'S CORONATION.
THEY WERE LED BY HER DAUGHTER-- ALSO CALLED NZINGA-- A LITHE LIONESS OF TWENTY RAINS.


THE AILING GENERAL CAN WELL IMAGINE THE YOUNGER NZINGA'S REACTION TO THE NEWS OF HIS MONARCH'S MISSION:
WE WILL GO WITH YOU, CONAN OF AQUILONIA!
HER FEATHER-TUFTED SPEAR AT HIS FEET--SYMBOL OF HER OFFER OF ALLIANCE.
MY THANKS NZINGA, DAUGHTER OF NZINGA.
THUS, PALLANTIDES TRIES ANOTHER TACK:
STILL, SIRE, IT MIGHT BE A THOUSAND LEAGUES TO THIS--THIS LAND OF NO RETURN, OF WHICH A DEAD CONJURER SPOKE.
EVEN MBEGA HAS NO MAPS OF THAT REGION, YOU SAID.
MAPS ARE FOR MARCHING MEN, OLD FRIEND.
AND HOW WILL YOU GO? FLY?
THAT IS, PRINCE CONN AND I SHALL RIDE THEM--AS SHALL THE PICK OF MBEGA'S ROYAL GUARD.
YES--FLY! WE'LL BE RIDING THE WYVERNS--THOSE FLYING DRAGONS TRAINED BY MBEGA'S DEAD TWIN.*
LUCKILY, WHEN THOTH-AMON ESCAPED ON ONE OF THE BRUTES, NOT ALL WERE LET LOOSE.
*LAST ISSUE. --ROY.
SIRE--YOU CAN'T RIDE THOSE WINGED DEVILS!
I CAN TRY!
I'VE RIDDEN HORSES AND CAMELS--AYE, EVEN ELEPHANTS, ON OCCASION--SO A MERE DRAGON SHOULDN'T DAUNT ME.
PALLANTIDES KNOWS WHEN A MATTER IS SETTLED... AND RAILS NO MORE.
YET, THE CIMMERIAN-BORN SOVEREIGN SOON LEARNS THERE IS MUCH IN WHAT HIS GENERAL HAS SAID...
WELL, MBEGA--SOME OF YOUR MEN HAVE MASTERED THESE THINGS, SURELY ENOUGH.
TIME FOR ME TO TRY--THOUGH I'D PREFER NOT BEING TIED TO THE SADDLE, THIS WAY.
THOSE OF MY MEN WHO RIDE THE WYVERNS, DID SO ERE NOW, CONAN.
I WOULD NOT LOSE YOU, AFTER THE GOOD FRIEND YOU HAVE BEEN TO ME.

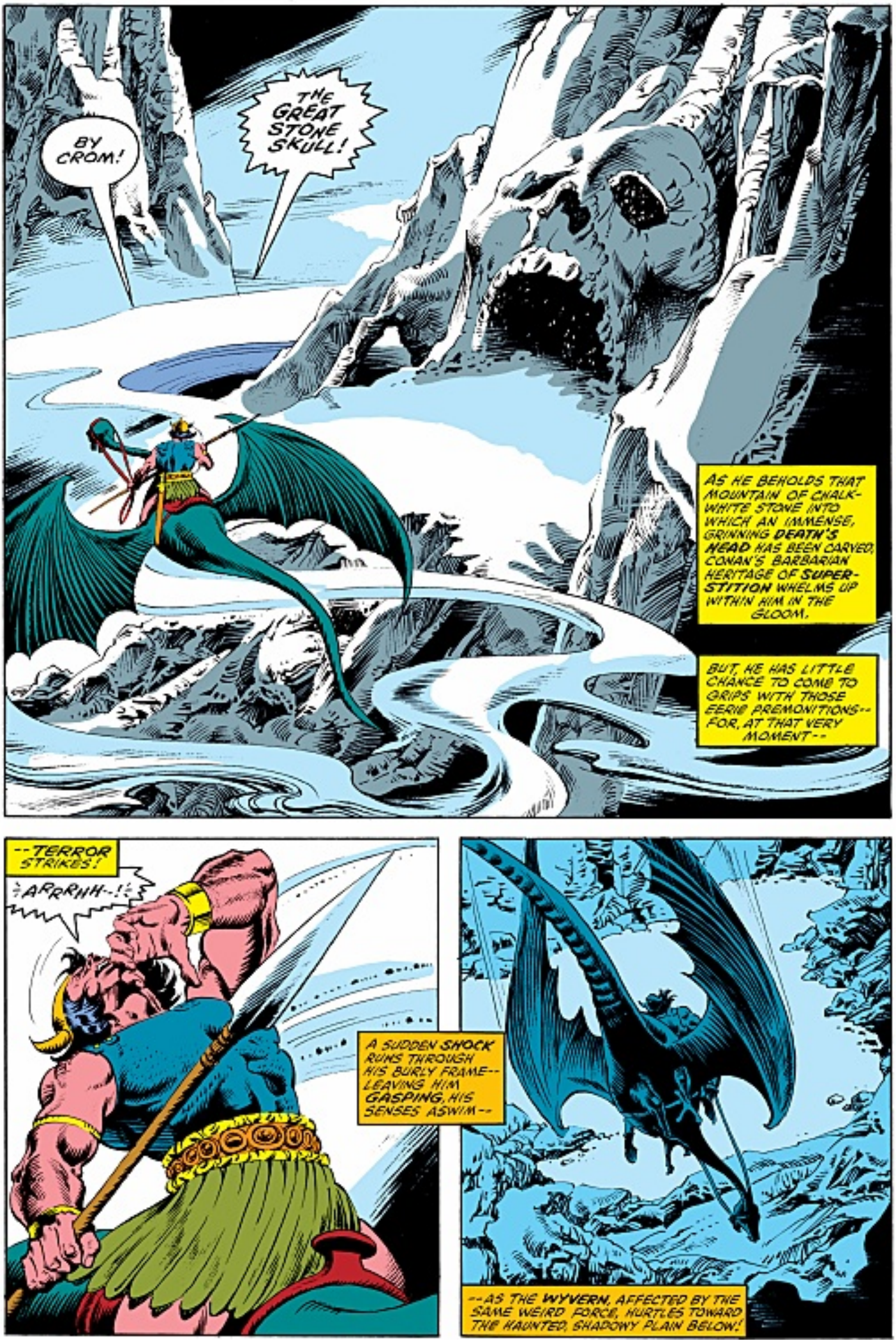

THEN, CONAN IS ALOFT--AND FEELING SENSATIONS WHICH EVEN HE HAS SELDOM KNOWN BEFORE--
--THOUGH THE GOOD WIZARD PELIAS DID SEND HIM WINGING IT ON A SIMILAR CREATURE, TO HIS EPIC BATTLE WITH TSOTHA-LANTI, YEARS AGO.
HE IS WRAPPED THUS IN REVERIE WHEN, FAR BELOW, A GAZELLE SUDDENLY BOLTS FROM COVER--
--AND HE IS SUDDENLY GLAD TO BE STRAPPED TO THE WYVERN'S BACK.
WHOA, YOU HAIRY DEVIL!
UP, I SAY! UP!
HAH! AT LEAST YOU RESPOND TO A SPEAR-BLOW THE WAY MBEGA SAID YOU WOULD...
...AND MY STOMACH CAN RETURN TO ITS NORMAL PLACE IN MY INSIDES.
FRANKLY, IF I HAD A CHOICE, I'D TAKE MY CHANCES AFOOT WITH THE WARRIORS OF NZINGA AND MBEGA.
BESIDES--YOU SMELL!
STILL, WHEN THE WAR-EXPEDITION SETS OUT, DAYS LATER, THERE IS NO DENYING THAT THE WYVERNS MOVE AT A SPEED WHICH FAR OUTSTRIPS THOSE ON THE GROUND...
HO, FATHER! LOOK AT ME!
HOLD THE REINS, BOY!
BUT CONAN SMILES TO HIMSELF TO NOTE THAT HIS SON AND HEIR-APPARENT IS AMONG THE BEST OF ALL THE DRAGON-RIDERS.

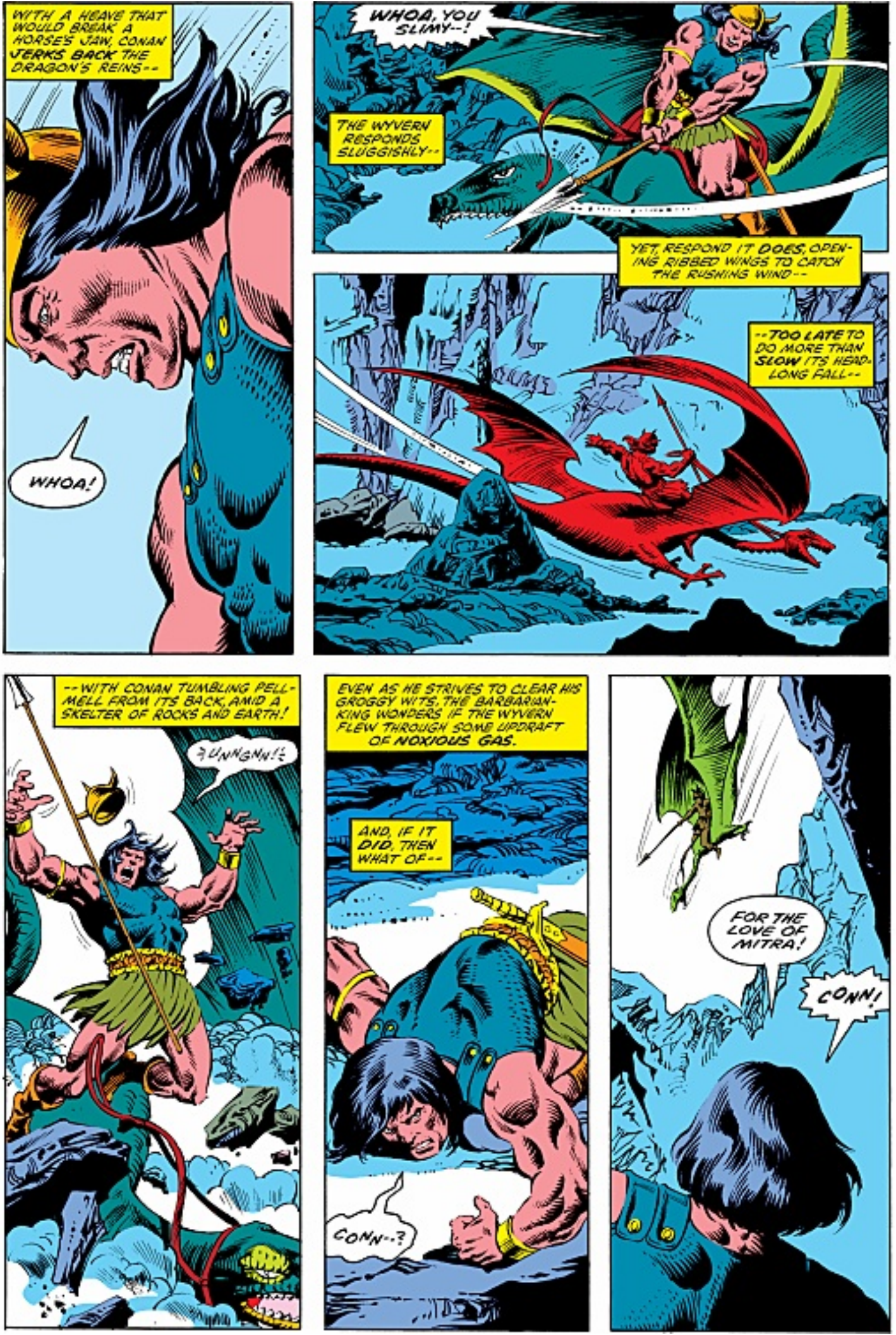

BELOW, LIKE A COLUMN OF BLACK ANTS WHEN THEY CAN BE SEEN AT ALL THROUGH THE THICK FOLIAGE, MBEGA'S WARRIORS MARCH UNDER ORDERS OF COUNT TROCERO, AT A SPEED WHICH EVEN CONAN'S TOUGH AQUILONIAN VETERANS WOULD BE HARD-PUT TO MATCH.
TROCERO HIMSELF UNABLE BY REASON OF AGE TO KEEP UP, IS OFTEN BORNE ON A LITTER BY STALWART WARRIORS--THOUGH HE WALKS PROUDLY, WHENEVER HE CAN.

BEHIND THE MEN, AND SEPARATED FROM THEM BY A TRAIN OF MEN AND WOMEN BEARING FOOD AND SUPPLIES, COME YOUNG NZINGA AND HER TIRELESS BLACK AMAZONS...
...AND CONAN MUSES, FROM ABOVE, THAT HE'D HAVE BEEN HONORED TO HAVE SUCH A WOMAN AS THIS NZINGA FOR HIS DAUGHTER.


BY DAY, CONAN AND HIS SCOUTING FORCE RANGE FAR AHEAD, SPYING OUT THE BEST ROUTES IN THIS HORSELESS LAND.
BY NIGHT, HE RETURNS TO TROCERO AND NZINGA, FOR HE KNOWS THAT BOTH AIR AND GROUND FORCES MUST STRIKE AS ONE, IF THEY ARE TO OVERCOME BOTH THE SUPREME WIZARDRY OF THOTH-AMON...
...AND WHATEVER GRIM, DESPERATE ALLIES, HE MAY FIND IN THE LEGENDARY LAND OF NO RETURN.

IT HAS BEEN TWO MONTHS SINCE MEN AND BEASTS LEFT ZEMBABWEI'S GATES--AND THE HAZE-REDDENED SUN IS SINKING TOWARD THE JAGGED HORIZON--WHEN THE CIMMERIAN SIGHTS HIS FIRST LANDMARK:
THE GREAT WATERFALL, A WHITE GLITTER THAT PLUNGES FROM TOWERING CLIFFS.
FOR A MOMENT, HE PONDERS WHETHER HE OUGHT TO RETURN TO THE GROUND FORCE, NOW FAR BEHIND...
BUT NO! HE'LL MAKE A FEW CASTS EASTWARD, AS DEAD RIMUSH SAID, AND THEN SWING NORTH AGAIN.
PLENTY OF TIME TO REJOIN HIS TROOPS BEFORE NIGHTFALL.
COME, LADS!
AND PRINCE CONN, GRINNING ACROSS THE INTERVENING DISTANCE, FOLLOWS HIS LEAD--JUST AS MBEGA'S WARRIORS, IN TURN, FOLLOW HIM.
MOVE, OLD SCALE-BACK!
A KING CALLS!
THE LAD HAS BEEN THROUGH MUCH SINCE HE JOINED HIS SIRE'S EXPEDITION AT NEBTHU, ON THE RIVER STYX--AND HAS SURELY LEARNED A FEW THINGS ABOUT BEING A WARRIOR-KING, CONAN MUSES.
HIS SIRE DECIDES HE WAS RIGHT TO IGNORE HIS COUNCILORS' ADVICE AND BRING HIS SON ALONG ON EVEN SUCH A DANGEROUS MISSION.
IT IS LATE AFTERNOON--NIGH TIME FOR TURNING BACK--WHEN CONAN SEES HIS SON SUDDENLY POINT...
THERE, FATHER! THERE!


BY CROM!
THE GREAT STONE SKULL!
AS HE BEHOLDS THAT MOUNTAIN OF CHALK-WHITE STONE INTO WHICH AN IMMENSE, GRINNING DEATH'S HEAD HAS BEEN CARVED, CONAN'S BARBARIAN HERITAGE OF SUPER-STITION WHELMS UP WITHIN HIM IN THE GLOOM.
BUT, HE HAS LITTLE CHANCE TO COME TO GRIPS WITH THOSE EERIE PREMONITIONS--FOR, AT THAT VERY MOMENT--
--TERROR STRIKES!
ARRRHH--!
A SUDDEN SHOCK RUNS THROUGH HIS BURLY FRAME--LEAVING HIM GASPING, HIS SENSES ASWIM--
--AS THE WYVERN, AFFECTED BY THE SAME WEIRD FORCE, HURTLES TOWARD THE HAUNTED, SHADOWY PLAIN BELOW!


WITH A HEAVE THAT WOULD BREAK A HORSE'S JAW, CONAN JERKS BACK THE DRAGON'S REINS--
WHOA!
WHOA, YOU SLIMY--!
THE WYVERN RESPONDS SLUGGISHLY--
YET, RESPOND IT DOES, OPENING RIBBED WINGS TO CATCH THE RUSHING WIND--
--TOO LATE TO DO MORE THAN SLOW ITS HEADLONG FALL--
--WITH CONAN TUMBLING PELL-MELL FROM ITS BACK, AMID A SKELTER OF ROCKS AND EARTH!
?UNNGNN!?
EVEN AS HE STRIVES TO CLEAR HIS GROGGY WITS, THE BARBARIAN-KING WONDERS IF THE WYVERN FLEW THROUGH SOME UPDRAFT OF NOXIOUS GAS.
AND, IF IT DID, THEN WHAT OF--
CONN--?
FOR THE LOVE OF MITRA!
CONN!

ONE BY ONE, THE STUNNED DRAGONS PLUMMET FROM THE SKY-- BUT THE RUSH OF AIR SEEMS TO ROUSE THE FAINTING LAD--
--SO THAT HE JERKS BACK THE REINS, WITH EVERY OUNCE OF VIGOR IN HIS LITHE YOUNG THEWS--
STOP, CURSE YOUR HIDE!
--AND HIS WYVERN LURCHES DRUNKENLY-- BUT MORE OR LESS SAFELY-- TO THE GROUND.
CONN! CONN, MY SON--
ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, BOY?
I-- STRUCK MY HEAD-- ON A ROCK, I THINK--
BUT, WE CIMMERIANS ARE TOO HARD-HEADED TO KILL THAT WAY, EH, FATHER?
AYE, LAD.
AYE!
TWO OF THE WARRIORS OF MBEGA, ALAS, ARE LESS FORTUNATE.
AAAAAA
FAILING TO RECOVER FROM THE EFFECTS OF THE WIZARDLY SKY BARRIER, THEY CRASH TO EARTH WITH A SICKENING CRUNCH OF SNAPPING BONES.
THE REST, HOWEVER, MANAGE SOMEHOW TO BRING THEIR NUMBED REPTILE MOUNTS FLOUNDERING TO THE GROUND...
...THOUGH SOMETIMES WITH MARROW-SHAKING IMPACT.

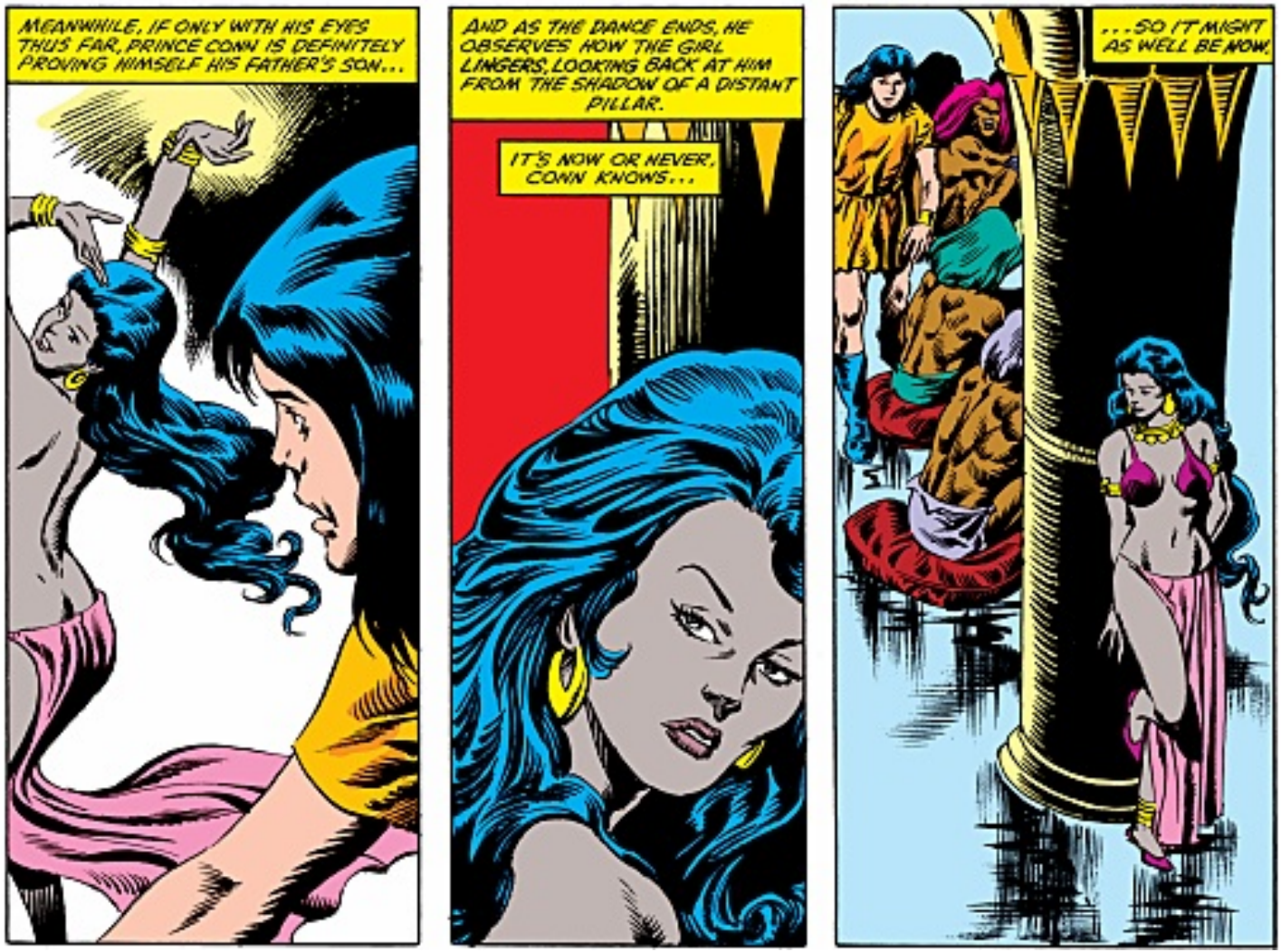
THEN, AS THE BLACK WARRIORS, RECOVERING FROM THEIR DIZZINESS, WORK AT HOBBLING THEIR BEASTS...
WHAT IS IT, LAD? IF IT'S THAT GRINNING SKULL OF STONE, I'VE ALREADY SEEN--
FATHER-- LOOK THERE!
IT-- ISN'T THAT, SIRE...
THEN WHAT IS IT, LAD, AMID THIS DEAD PLAIN, THAT INTERESTS YOU SO?
SURELY, YOU'VE SEEN ENOUGH ROCKS EVEN IN YOUR BRIEF LIFE-TIME TO--
THEN, KING CONAN STOPS SHORT...
FOR, HE SUDDENLY BEHOLDS THAT WHICH HAD BEEN, BUT MOMENTS BEFORE, WHOLLY IN-VISIBLE TO THE NAKED EYE FROM ABOVE--
--AND HE SEES THAT THE CLIFF, WHICH FROM THE AIR HAD SEEMED A CARVED SKULL, NOW APPEARS AS THE FACADE OF A SPLENDID, ORNATE PALACE!
CROM'S THUNDER!
WHICH OF THE TWO SIGHTS IS REAL, I WONDER--
--THE BARREN LANDSCAPE WE VIEWED FROM THE SKY--

--OR THIS MEADOW, WITH ITS SPANGLE OF FLOWERS?
FATHER--THE AIR--!
YOU'RE RIGHT, SON--THAT'S THE TRUE TEST.
AND IT SMELLS OF PERFUMED FLOWERS AND LUSH GRASSES.
WAS IT SOME HYPNOTIC VAPOR WE SOARED THROUGH, THEN, THAT--?
ANGALIA!
EH? WHAT IS IT, MAKWANA?
THE PALACE, KING CONAN!
SOMEONE COMES!
AND INDEED, FIGURES ARE DRIFTING THROUGH THE PILLARS, DOWN THE SMOOTH STAIRS, COMING TOWARD THEM THROUGH THE SWAYING GRASS:
WOMEN ALL--DUSKY, SINUOUS, WITH SMILING RED LIPS AND EYES LIKE BLACK JEWELS.
LITTLE CRYSTAL BELLS ARE WOVEN THROUGH THE COILS OF THEIR JET-DARK HAIR, SO THAT EACH FIGURE IS SURROUNDED BY A FAINTLY CHIMING MUSIC.

WHAT SHALL WE DO, KING CONAN?
PERHAPS WE CAN LEARN SOMETHING FROM THESE WOMEN, WHO DO NOT SEEM DANGEROUS.
BESIDES, THE GROGGY DRAGONS COULD USE A REST.
HALF OF YOU, COME WITH ME; THE OTHERS WILL GUARD THE WYVERNS.
AND MKWAWA--DETAIL ONE MAN TO FLY BACK TO THE ARMY, TO SET THEM ON OUR TRAIL.
STILL, AS HE WALKS BOLDLY FORWARD, CONAN MUSES THAT THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH A PLACE THAT CHANGES ITS ENTIRE APPEARANCE IN THE SPACE OF A FEW HEARTBEATS.
Three nights later:
ON THE MARBLE FLOOR OF A GREAT HALL, CONAN AND HIS MEN SPRAWL ON NESTS OF SILKEN CUSHIONS, FEELING CURIOUSLY LAZY AND RELAXED... THEIR BELLIES FILLED WITH SUBTLY FLAVORED VIANDS...
...AND ONLY YOUNG CONN SEEMS TO EVINCE MORE THAN A PASSING INTEREST IN THE SENSUOUSLY DANCING WOMEN NEARBY.

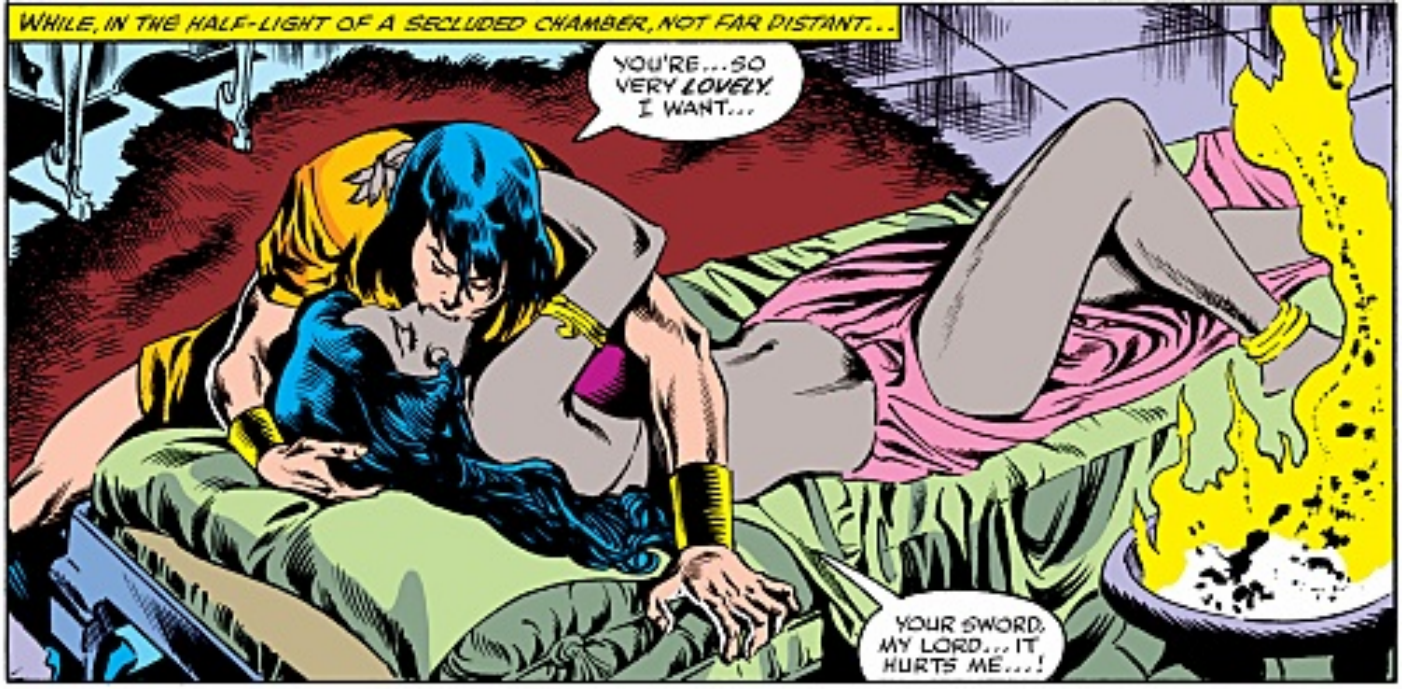
HE HIMSELF HAD NOT BEEN MUCH OLDER, CONAN MUSES, WHEN HE HAD MET URSLA, THE BEAR-WOMAN, PRIESTESS OF THE MOUNTAIN FASTNESS.*
AFTER THAT TIMELY ENCOUNTER, HE HAD SOON BEGUN HIS ROAMINGS, AND QUICKLY SHED THE GRIM PURITANISM OF A CIMMERIAN VILLAGE.
SO, QUEEN LILIT...
...YOU SAY THIS CAVE-CITY OF YOURS IS CALLED YANYOGA?
*SEE CONAN THE BARBARIAN #48. --ROY.
YES, CONAN, AND I AM TRULY SORRY I CANNOT HELP YOU.
BUT, I FEAR I KNOW NOTHING OF THIS THOTH-AMON YOU SEEK... NOR WERE WE AWARE THAT THESE CLIFFS LOOK SKULL-LIKE FROM THE SKY.
FEW PEOPLE COME TO US THAT WAY, OF COURSE.
OF COURSE.
BUT I'M STILL CURIOUS HOW A CITY OF WOMEN CAME TO BE HERE... IF YOU KNOW.
OH, WE KNOW WELL ENOUGH, MY LORD...
"A FEW CENTURIES AGO, A MIGHTY KING IN DISTANT VENDHYA SENT FORTH A FLEET ON A TRADING MISSION TO IRANISTAN.
"A TYPHOON BLEW THIS FLEET FAR OFF ITS COURSE ACROSS THE SOUTHERN OCEAN...
"...AND THE BATTERED SURVIVORS MADE LANDFALL NOT MANY LEAGUES FROM HERE.
"THEY FOUND, AND ENSLAVED, A RACE OF SMALL, YELLOW-SKINNED ABORIGINES, WHO STILL SERVE US AS SERFS.

THE VENDHYANS THEMSELVES MATED WITH SLAVE GIRLS WHO HAD BEEN PART OF THEIR CARGO.
THESE FOLK, AND THEIR DESCENDANTS, CARVED YANYOGA OUT OF THE SOFT, CHALKY ROCK OF THIS CLIFF FACE.
INTERESTING.
THIS PALACE, CONAN THINKS, IS REALLY TOO OSTENTATIOUS FOR HIS TASTES...
...OR IS IT JUST THAT WINE HAS DULLED HIS WOLF-SHARP SENSES?


MEANWHILE, IF ONLY WITH HIS EYES THUS FAR, PRINCE CONN IS DEFINITELY PROVING HIMSELF HIS FATHER'S SON...
AND AS THE DANCE ENDS, HE OBSERVES HOW THE GIRL LINGERS, LOOKING BACK AT HIM FROM THE SHADOW OF A DISTANT PILLAR.
IT'S NOW OR NEVER, CONN KNOWS...
...SO IT MIGHT AS WELL BE NOW.

NOW WHERE THE DEVIL DID--
OH, THERE YOU ARE!
AND WHERE ELSE SHOULD I BE, YOUNG PRINCE?
YOU'RE VERY BEAUTIFUL! I--
NOT HERE! THE QUEEN--!
WHERE, THEN?
COME...!
SOON, ONE BY ONE, THE OTHER FEASTERS ALSO RISE AND DEPART, THOUGH NOT ALONE...
...LEAVING THEIR KING DOZING ON HIS CUSHIONS, AS HIS HONEY WINE MAKES A PUDDLE ON THE MARBLE FLOOR.
NOW, SWARTHY SERVING-MEN APPEAR IN THE NEARLY EMPTY HALL, GLIDING AMONG THE SEATS ABANDONED BY CONAN'S GUARDSMEN.

THE BLACKS HAVE LEFT BEHIND THEIR WEAPONS, NOT THINKING TO NEED THEM IN THEIR AMOROUS ENCOUNTERS.
THEY WERE WRONG.
NOR DOES THE SNORING KING OF AQUILONIA AWAKEN...
...AS SUPPLE HANDS RELIEVE HIM OF HIS LONGSWORD.
THEN, QUEEN LILIT IS STANDING OVER THE SLEEPING CONAN...
A DAGGER.
HERE, MY QUEEN.
THE SIBILANT TONGUE THEY WHISPER NOW IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE SHEMITISH TRADE-LANGUAGE THEY SPOKE EARLIER...
AND THE SMILE HAS FADED FROM HER PERFECTLY-SCULPTED FACE--
--AS SHE LIFTS THAT DAGGER HIGH, POISED ABOVE THE CIMMERIAN'S SLOWLY BEATING HEART...!


WHILE, IN THE HALF-LIGHT OF A SECLUDED CHAMBER, NOT FAR DISTANT...
YOU'RE...SO VERY LOVELY. I WANT...
YOUR SWORD, MY LORD... IT HURTS ME...!

WE, UH, CAN'T HAVE THAT NOW, CAN WE?
WELL, THAT'S EASILY TAKEN CARE OF.

I'LL JUST SET IT OVER BY THIS COPPER CHEST, AND--
NO! NO!!
WHAT IS WRONG, YOUNG PRINCE?

YOUR REFLECTION!
Y-YOUR HEAD!

YOU'RE ONE OF THE SNAKE-PEOPLE MY FATHER TOLD ME ABOUT!
THIS IS ALL A TRAP!
NO, MY LORD... I SWEAR IT...

YOU ARE WRONG! I AM ONLY A AAAAAAAH
EVEN AS HE DRIVES HIS GLEAMING BLADE HOME, YOUNG CONN IS SEIZED BY A HORRIBLE FEAR THAT HE HAS MADE A TRAGIC MISTAKE...
...BUT OF COURSE, HE HAS NOT.
AND, AS THE SERPENT-THING'S LIFE EBBS, AND DULL GRAY SCALES TAKE THE PLACE OF WARM DUSKY SKIN...
...AQUILONIA'S PRINCE IS SUDDENLY SICK.
UNNNHNN-!
WHEN IT IS OVER, HE FEELS WEAK, BUT PURGED...HIS MIND CLEAR.
CONN KNOWS THE ANCIENT MYTHS OF THE SERPENT-FOLK, SLAIN IN LEGEND BY MIRA THE LIGHT-BRINGER...
...BUT IN ACTUALITY BY KULL, HERO-KING OF ANCIENT VALUSIA.
ONCE, LONG BEFORE EVEN KULL'S TIME, THEY HAD RULED OVER ORDINARY MEN...AND THEY COULD CLOUD MEN'S MINDS TO PASS AMONG THEM, BUT THEY COULD NOT FOOL MIRRORS.
NOW, THE LAST SURVIVORS OF THIS LOATHSOME RACE HAVE FLED TO THE WORLD'S RIM TO BIDE THEIR TIME...
...AND IT MAY BE THAT ONLY CONN KNOWS THEIR HORRIBLE SECRET!
FATHER...!

AS, ELSEWHERE--
LILIT! HOLD!
WHO DARES--?
YOU! WHO COMMANDS HERE, STYGIAN--YOU OR I?
VENGEANCE IS MINE, LILIT.
IN ALL ELSE, I YIELD TO YOU...BUT IN THIS I AM ADAMANT.
THE CIMMERIAN IS THOTH-AMON'S CAPTIVE!
MY CENTURIES WEIGH HEAVILY UPON ME NOW, SINCE THAT BARBARIAN DOG SMASHED FIRST THE BLACK RING AT NEBTHU...
...THEN NEHALENNIR IN ZEMBABWEI.
BUT, THOUGH MY FORM NOW BE OLD, SHRUNKEN AND FRAIL... MY MAGIC STILL IS SUFFICIENT TO DESTROY HIM.
I KNOW YOUR CUNNING HEART, HUMAN JACKAL!
YOU THINK TO SACRIFICE HIM TO FATHER SET, GOD OF US SERPENT-FOLK...AND THUS REGAIN YOUR FAVORED POSITION.
BUT I, TOO, HAVE PLANS FOR THE CIMMERIAN...
URRKK
...AND IT IS THOSE PLANS THAT SHALL--
BY MAMAJAMBO'S WAR CLUB!
WE HAVE COME JUST IN TIME!

COME, WARRIORS!
LESS HALE AND HEARTY THAN YOU I MAY BE, BUT I MUST SEE HOW MY KING FARE IN THIS ACCURSED--
BY ALL THE GODS--THOTH-AMON!
OH, AYE? WE DRAW NEAR A SKULL-CLIFF THAT BECOMES A MEADOW-GIRT PALACE...
...TO FIND THE LORD CONAN SNORING LIKE A BESOTTED DRUNKARD...
...AND THIS WOMAN-THING BENDING OVER HIM WITH A KNIFE, AS WELL AS AN OLD MAN IN A ROBE!
WHAT MONSTROUS SORCERY IS THIS, ANYWAY?
THE...SNAKE... THAT... SPEAKS!
THE SNAKE THAT SPEAKS!
OLD MAN, YOU SPEAK OF THAT WHICH NONE SHOULD NAME ALOUD!
CAN IT BE, THOUGH, THAT THE OLD MYTHS ARE TRUE?
THE PROOF OF IT LIES DEAD AT YOUR FEET, NZINGA.
LOOK! EVEN AS WE FENCE WITH WORDS--
--IT CHANGES, IT'S REPTILE BODY LOSING ALL HUMAN SEMBLANCE, MOMENT BY MOMENT! IT--
TROCERO! NZINGA! BEWARE!--

THE SERPENT-MEN!
HHSSSSSSSSS
OLD MAN-- IT APPEARS YOU MAY HAVE BEEN RIGHT, AFTER ALL.
PRINCESS-- YOU ARE A MASTER OF UNDER-STATEMENT!
YOUR MOTHER, THE QUEEN, SHOULD MAKE YOU CHIEF AMONG HER DIPLOMATS!
THEN, BOTH TROCERO AND NZINGA ARE FAR TOO BUSY FOR FURTHER SPEECH...
--AS WARRIORS AND THE HISSING HORDE FALL UPON EACH OTHER!
AND, IN THE MAD CLASH THAT FOLLOWS, NEITHER OF THEM NOTICES THE STRANGEST, MOST INEXPLICABLE THING OF ALL:
BOTH THE SPRAWLING, UNCONSCIOUS CIMMERIAN AND HIS SORCEROUS ARCH-FOE THOTH-AMON HAVE VANISHED, AS IF MELTED INTO THIN AIR!

NEARLY TWO DECADES OF KINGSHIP OVER A CULTURED REALM HAVE LAID BUT A THIN VENEER OF CIVILIZATION OVER CONAN'S PRIMITIVE SOUL.
THUS, AS HE WAKES FROM HIS DRUGGED SLUMBER, THE CIMMERIAN'S SENSES ARE INSTANTLY SHARP...
UNNNHH--!
AND HIS EARS DETECT THE DULL BOOM OF WAVES POUNDING A ROCKY SHORE, EVEN AS HIS NOSTRILS TASTE THE SALT TANG IN THE AIR.

FROM A BRIEF GLANCE AT STARRY SKIES AS HE STARTS TO RISE, HE KNOWS THAT THE NEARBY SEA STRETCHES AWAY TO THE SOUTH.
BUT, AS FAR AS HIS SMOLDERING GAZE CAN PENETRATE THE MURK OF NIGHT, HE CAN SEE NO LAND.
IT IS AS IF HE LIES AT THE WORLD'S VERY EDGE, AND THE SHORE THEREOF IS WASHED BY THE ENDLESS SEAS OF ETERNITY.
HOW, HE WONDERS, DID HE COME HERE?

HE DOES NOT WONDER FOR LONG.
WE MEET AGAIN, DOG OF CIMMERIA!
FOR THE LAST TIME, JACKAL OF STYGIA!
WARY OF THOTH-AMON'S REMAINING POWERS, HOWEVER, HE MAKES NO MOVE TOWARD THE GAUNT WIZARD.

YOU PONDER, I KNOW, WHY I BROUGHT YOU HERE ALIVE WITH THE AID OF THE UNSEEN DEMONS WHO STILL SERVE ME.
YOU HAVE HOUNDED ME DOWN THE LENGTH OF THE WORLD, BARBARIAN...

ONE BY ONE, YOU HAVE SUNDERED FROM ME MY MOST POWERFUL ALLIES:
THE WHITE HAND IN WINTRY HYPERBOREA... THE BLACK RING AT NEBTHU... EVEN NEHAUNIR IN ZEMBABWEI.
NOW, THERE IS NO FURTHER REALM TO WHICH I CAN FLY FOR REFUGE.

HERE AT THE WORLD'S EDGE DWELL THE LAST OF THE ANCIENT SERPENT-FOLK, WHO RULED THE EARTH BEFORE THE COMING OF MEN.
NOR HAVE THEY EVER RELINQUISHED THEIR HOPE OF REGAINING THEIR POWER ON THIS PITIFUL PLANET.
FROM THEM, I GAINED THE KNOWLEDGE THAT ENABLED ME TO BECOME THE EMISSARY OF SET, THE SERPENT-GOD.
AT THE SAME TIME, I HELD THEM IN CHECK-- HAVING NO WISH TO SHARE MY OWN RULE WITH THE CHILDREN OF THE SNAKE.
MY SPLENDID PLANS YOU ALONE HAVE THWARTED-- HOW, I KNOW NOT!
YOU ARE NO PRIEST OR PROPHET OR WIZARD-- ONLY A CRUDE, IGNORANT ADVENTURER, FOR THE MOMENT TOSSED HIGH BY THE WAVES OF FATE.
PERHAPS YOUR DEGENERATE WESTERN GODS HAVE HELPED YOU IN SUBTLE WAYS NEITHER OF US KNOWS.
BUT, ALL IS NOT YET LOST!
FOR, UNTO SET HIMSELF I SHALL OFFER UP YOUR SOUL IN SACRIFICE, AND THE SLITHERING GOD SHALL FEAST WELL ON IT.
THEN, RESTORED TO FAVOR, I SHALL UNLEASH THE UNCANNY POWERS OF THE SERPENT-FOLK IN ONE LAST, GREAT CRUSADE--!
THEN, SUDDENLY, CONAN STRIKES FROM SILENCE--!
YOU'VE DONE ENOUGH TALKING, SORCERER-- FOR NOW, OR FOR A DOZEN LIFETIMES.
TONIGHT, BY KING CONAN'S HAND--

--YOU DIE!
RRGK
CONAN'S TIGERISH CHARGE HAS TAKEN THE STRANGELY EMACIATED STYGIAN BY SURPRISE...

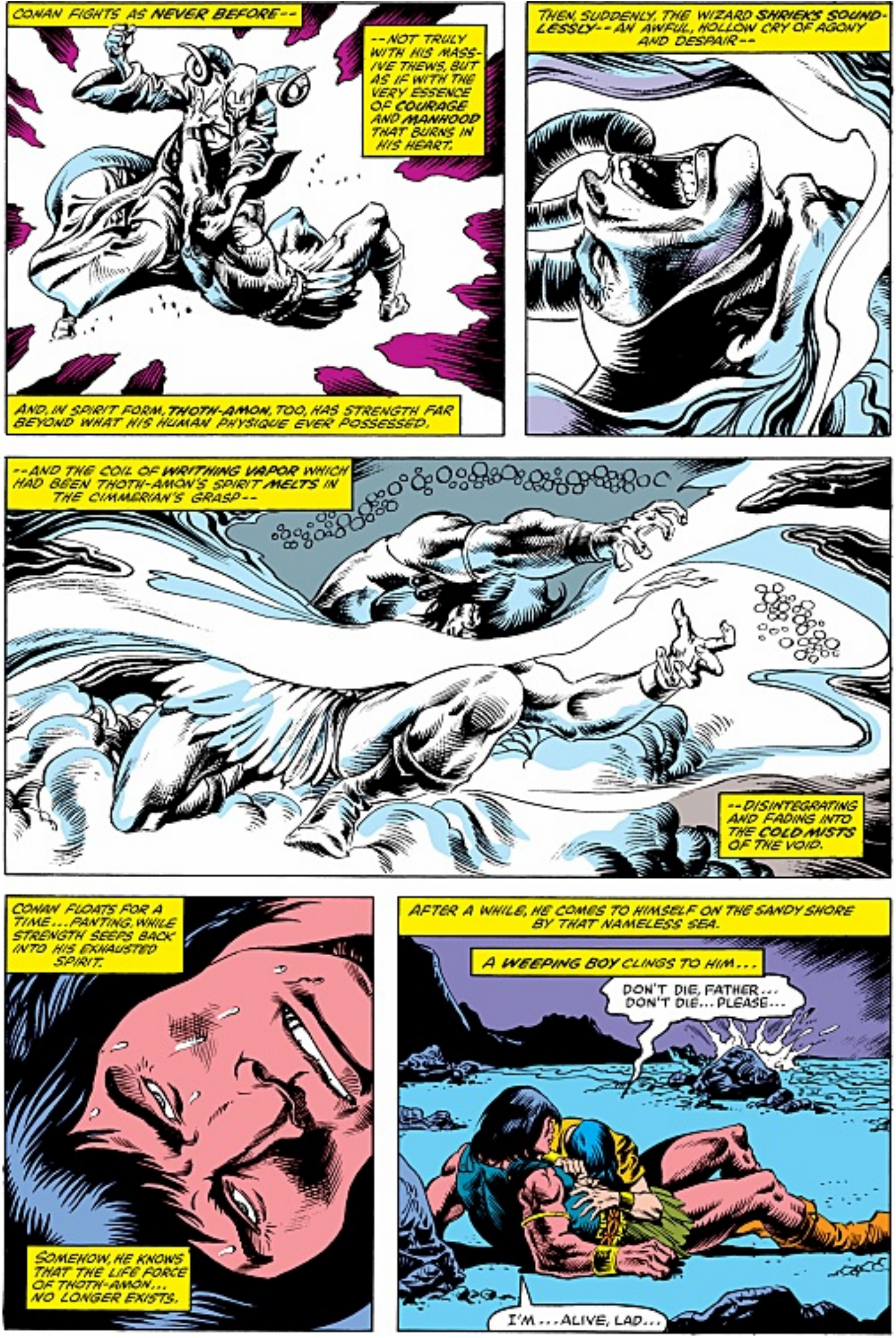
...AND ITS IMPACT HURLS THE PAIR BEYOND THE BOULDER, TO FALL LOCKED TOGETHER UPON DAMP SANDS.
YET, THOUGH LITTLE STRENGTH REMAINS IN THOTH-AMON'S WITHERED FORM, HIS WIZARDLY POWERS STILL LEND HIM UNEARTHLY SOURCES--

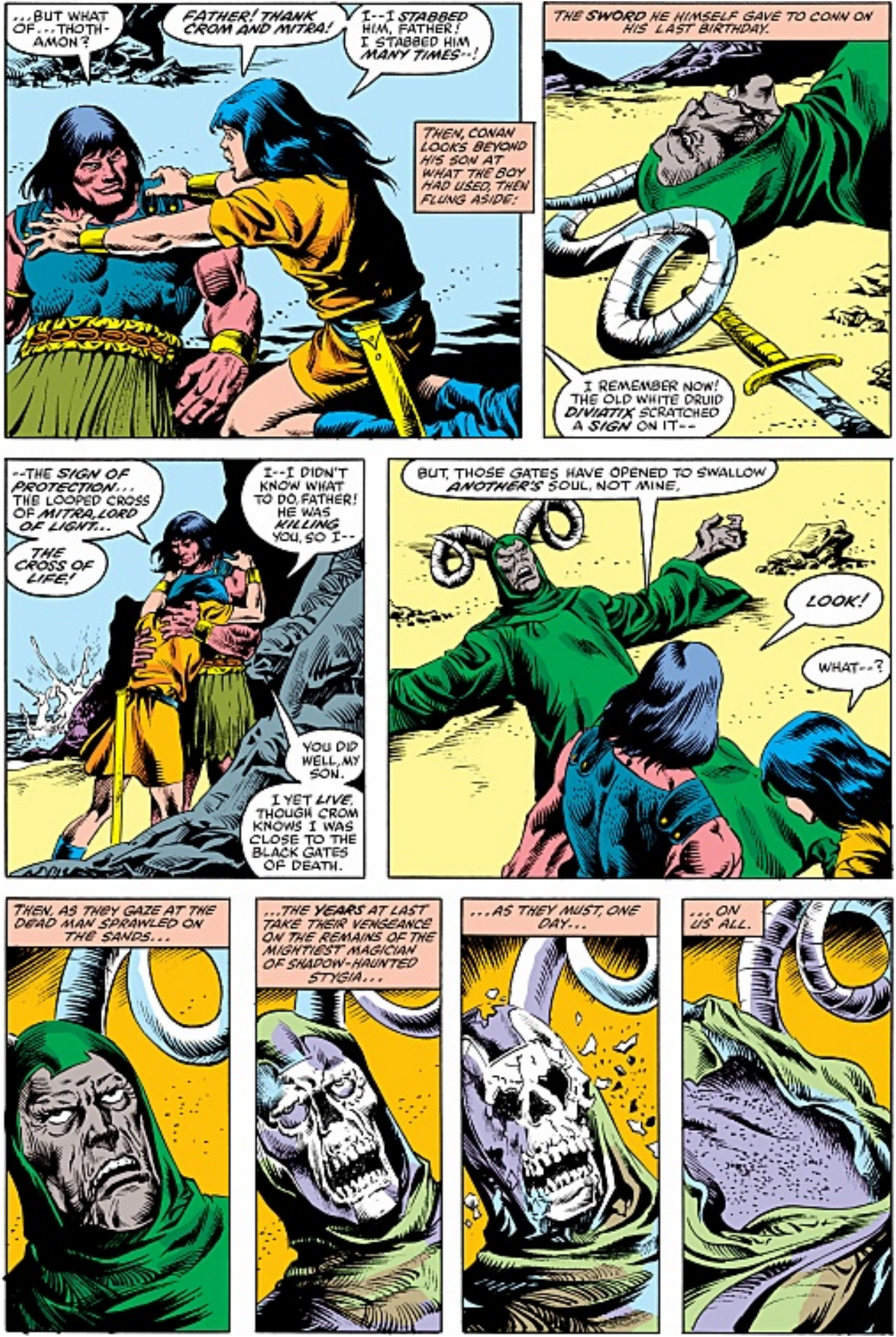
AND EVEN AS KING CONAN'S FINGERS LOCK ON THAT DUSKY, FRAGILE NECK...

...A TOUCH LIKE FREEZING FIRE BRUSHES LIGHTLY AGAINST HIS BROW--
AAARRRR

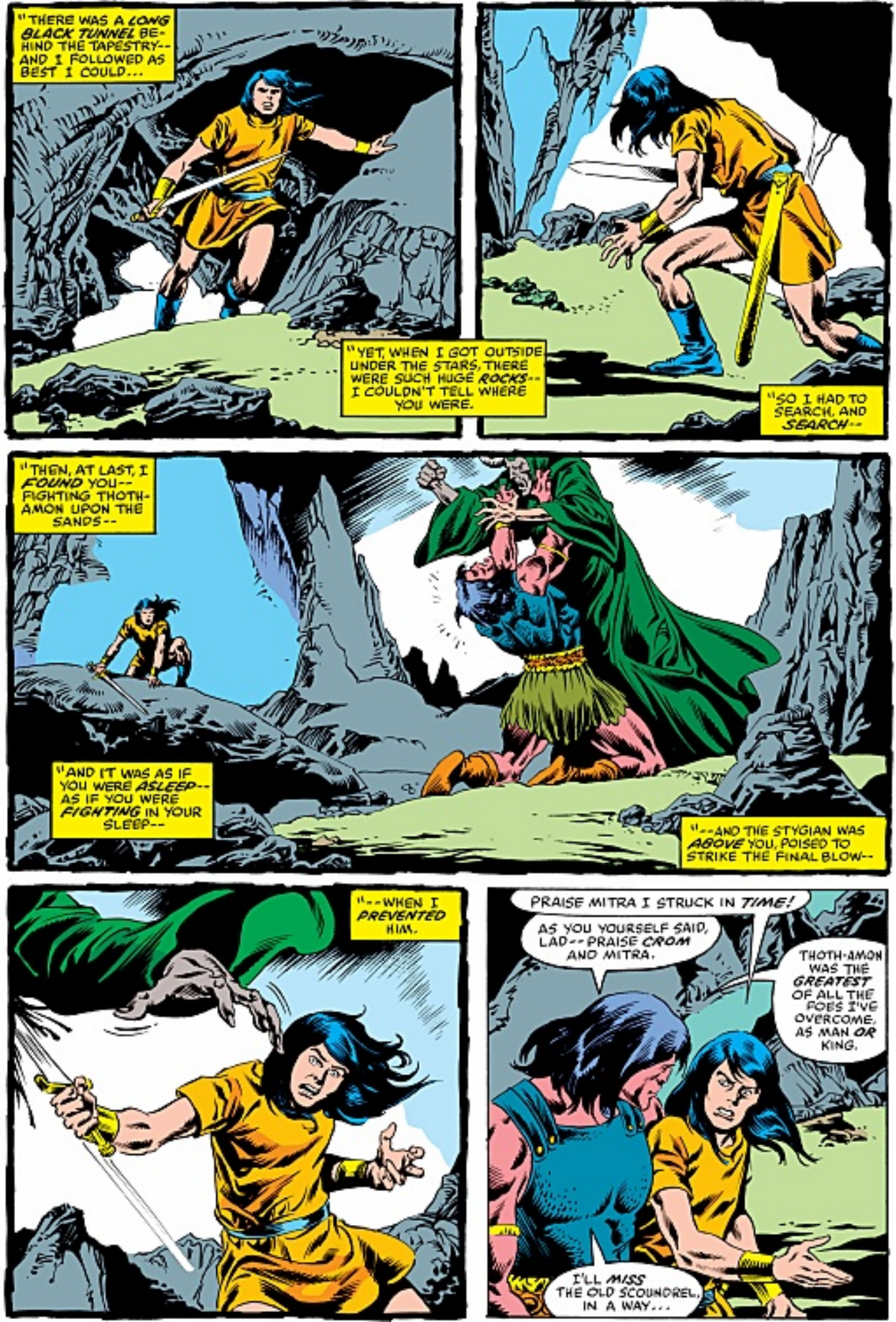
--AND COLD WAVES OF BLACKNESS ENGULF HIS CONSCIOUSNESS.
IT SEEMS TO THE BARBARIAN THAT HE SINKS THROUGH DARKLING WATERS WHOSE BITE BE-NUMB HIS FLESH...

...UNTIL HIS NAKED SPIRIT ALONE WRITHES THERE ON THE SANDS.
BUT STILL IS THOTH-AMON HELD HELPLESS IN CONAN'S GRIP-- FOR, IT IS AS IF THE SORCERER, TOO, HAS LEFT HIS FLESHLY SHELL BEHIND--
--AND TWO IM-PALPABLE SPIRITS, LOCKED IN CONFLICT, RISE FROM THE VORTEX INTO A DIM REGION BEYOND THE WORLD!
ABOUT THEM, MIST SWIRLS AND BILLOWS, GRAY AND COLORLESS.
ABOVE THEM, BLACK STARS BURN AGAINST NATURAL SKIES; THE LIGHT FROM THEM IS AS COLD AS THE BREATH OF ARCTIC WINDS.


CONAN FIGHTS AS NEVER BEFORE--
--NOT TRULY WITH HIS MASSIVE THEWS, BUT AS IF WITH THE VERY ESSENCE OF COURAGE AND MANHOOD THAT BURNS IN HIS HEART.
AND, IN SPIRIT FORM, THOTH-AMON, TOO, HAS STRENGTH FAR BEYOND WHAT HIS HUMAN PHYSIQUE EVER POSSESSED.
THEN, SUDDENLY, THE WIZARD SHRIEKS SOUNDLESSLY--AN AWFUL, HOLLOW CRY OF AGONY AND DESPAIR--
--AND THE COIL OF WRITHING VAPOR WHICH HAD BEEN THOTH-AMON'S SPIRIT MELTS IN THE CIMMERIAN'S GRASP--
--DISINTEGRATING AND FADING INTO THE COLD MISTS OF THE VOID.
CONAN FLOATS FOR A TIME...PANTING, WHILE STRENGTH SEEPS BACK INTO HIS EXHAUSTED SPIRIT.
SOMEHOW, HE KNOWS THAT THE LIFE FORCE OF THOTH-AMON... NO LONGER EXISTS.
AFTER A WHILE, HE COMES TO HIMSELF ON THE SANDY SHORE BY THAT NAMELESS SEA.
A WEEPING BOY CLINGS TO HIM...
DON'T DIE, FATHER... DON'T DIE... PLEASE...
I'M...ALIVE, LAD...


...BUT WHAT OF...THOTH-AMON?
FATHER! THANK CROM AND MITRA!
I--I STABBED HIM, FATHER! I STABBED HIM MANY TIMES--!
THEN, CONAN LOOKS BEYOND HIS SON AT WHAT THE BOY HAD USED, THEN FLUNG ASIDE:
THE SWORD HE HIMSELF GAVE TO CONN ON HIS LAST BIRTHDAY.
I REMEMBER NOW! THE OLD WHITE DRUID DIVIATIX SCRATCHED A SIGN ON IT--
--THE SIGN OF PROTECTION... THE LOOPED CROSS OF MITRA, LORD OF LIGHT...
THE CROSS OF LIFE!
I--I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO, FATHER! HE WAS KILLING YOU, SO I--
YOU DID WELL, MY SON.
I YET LIVE, THOUGH CROM KNOWS I WAS CLOSE TO THE BLACK GATES OF DEATH.
BUT, THOSE GATES HAVE OPENED TO SWALLOW ANOTHER'S SOUL, NOT MINE.
LOOK!
WHAT--?
THEN, AS THEY GAZE AT THE DEAD MAN SPRAWLED ON THE SANDS...
...THE YEARS AT LAST TAKE THEIR VENGEANCE ON THE REMAINS OF THE MIGHTIEST MAGICIAN OF SHADOW-HAUNTED STYGIA...
...AS THEY MUST, ONE DAY...
...ON US ALL.

SHALL WE GO WITHIN NOW, FATHER -- TO FIGHT ALONGSIDE THE OTHERS?
IN A MOMENT, SON, AS SOON AS I FIND--
AH, HERE IT IS.
THOTH-AMON'S RING!
WHO KNOWS WHAT VILE SORCERY STILL LURKS WITHIN ITS SPARKLING DEPTHS?
WILL YOU TAKE IT BACK TO TARANTIA, SIRE?
NO, SON. IT WOULD BE TOO TEMPTING A PRIZE FOR MEN OF EVIL PURPOSE, OR EVEN FOR--
SO END ALL MAGICAL MUMMERY!
MAY IT STAY AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA FOR A HUNDRED THOUSAND YEARS!
NOW, HOW CAME YOU HERE IN TIME TO SAVE YOUR OLD FATHER, CONN.
I WAS...WITH A GIRL, WHO TURNED INTO A SNAKE-HEADED MONSTER, SO THAT I HAD TO SLAY HER.
JUST AS I WAS COMING BACK TO YOU, THE AMAZONS CAME IN, TO SLAY THE QUEEN.
SHE TURNED INTO A SNAKE-THING TOO, OF COURSE...
"THEN, THERE WAS FIGHTING EVERYWHERE-- SERPENT-MEN AGAINST OUR WARRIORS--
"--AND I COULDN'T REACH YOUR SIDE, THROUGH THE FRAY.
"BUT I SAW THOTH-AMON CARRY YOU FROM THE HALL...
"...AS IF HIS MAGIC GAVE HIM A SHORT SURGE OF STRENGTH.
"NO ONE SEEMED TO BE ABLE TO SEE THIS EXCEPT ME...AS IF A SPELL HID HIS ACTIONS.


"THERE WAS A LONG BLACK TUNNEL BEHIND THE TAPESTRY--AND I FOLLOWED AS BEST I COULD...
"YET, WHEN I GOT OUTSIDE UNDER THE STARS, THERE WERE SUCH HUGE ROCKS--I COULDN'T TELL WHERE YOU WERE.
"SO I HAD TO SEARCH, AND SEARCH--
"THEN, AT LAST, I FOUND YOU--FIGHTING THOTH-AMON UPON THE SANDS--
"AND IT WAS AS IF YOU WERE ASLEEP--AS IF YOU WERE FIGHTING IN YOUR SLEEP--
"--AND THE STYGIAN WAS ABOVE YOU, POISED TO STRIKE THE FINAL BLOW--
"--WHEN I PREVENTED HIM.
PRAISE MITRA I STRUCK IN TIME!
AS YOU YOURSELF SAID, LAD--PRAISE CROM AND MITRA.
THOTH-AMON WAS THE GREATEST OF ALL THE FOES I'VE OVERCOME, AS MAN OR KING.
I'LL MISS THE OLD SCOUNDREL, IN A WAY...

...BUT NOT TOO MUCH.
I TAKE IT THAT'S THE WAY WE CAME?
AYE! WE'D BEST HURRY IF WE'RE GOING TO JOIN THE FRAY BEFORE THE SERPENT-MEN ARE ALL DEAD.
I'LL BE GLAD WHEN THE LAST OF THEM IS DEAD, NO MATTER BY WHOSE HAND. STILL...

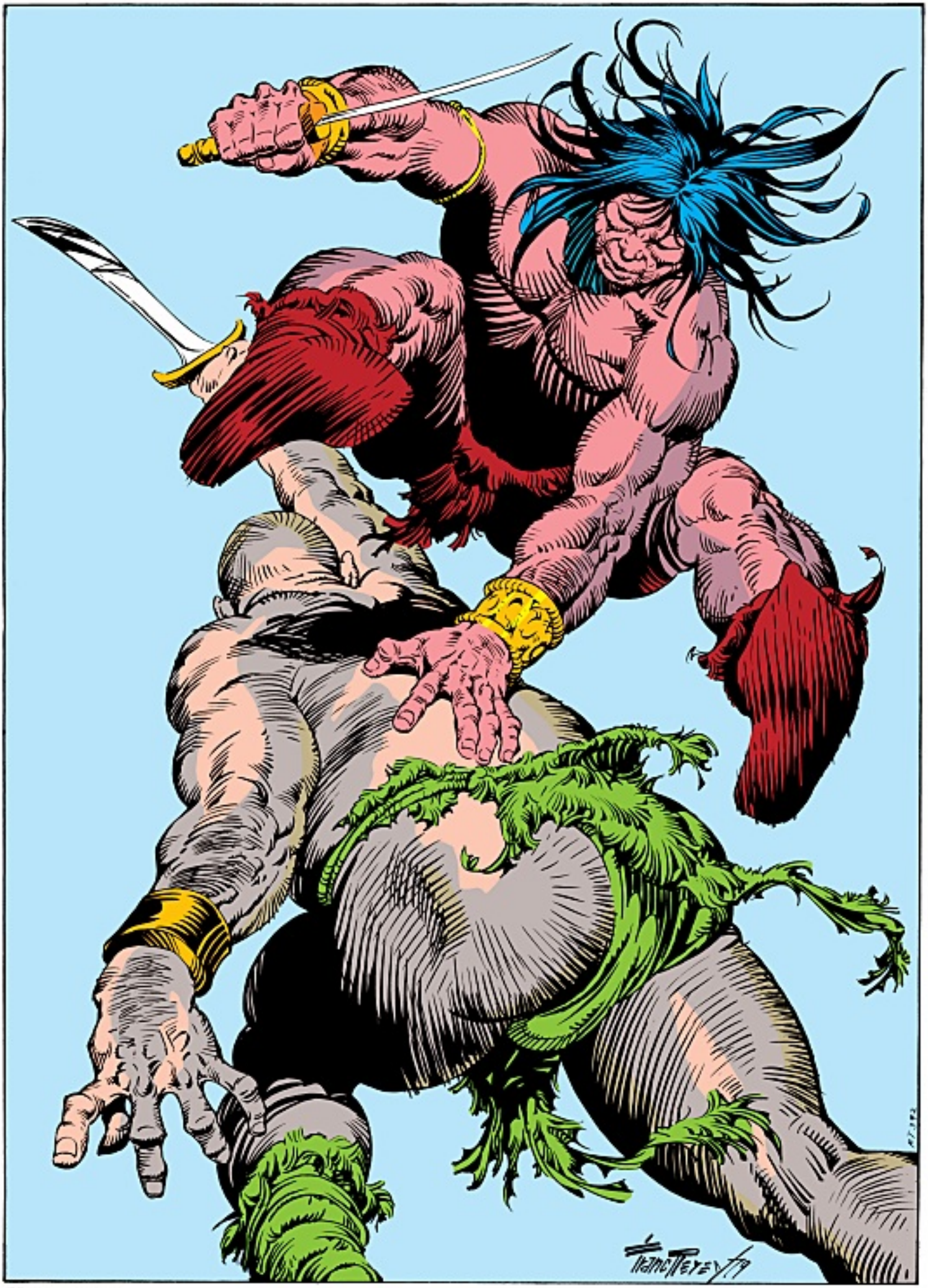
HMMM... DO YOU STILL HAVE YOUR SWORD, BOY?
YES, SIRE.
THEN, LET ME FIND AN APPROPRIATE MOPPING-UP WEAPON, AND WE'LL--
AH! THERE'S A COUPLE OF WHAT I'M AFTER!

COME ON! NOW THAT I THINK OF IT, I DO HUNGER TO SMASH IN THE HEADS OF A FEW SNAKE-MEN.
OH, AND BY THE WAY...

...THANKS FOR PUTTING A SWORD THROUGH OLD THOTH-AMON WHEN YOU DID... SON.
IT WAS MY PLEASURE... FATHER.

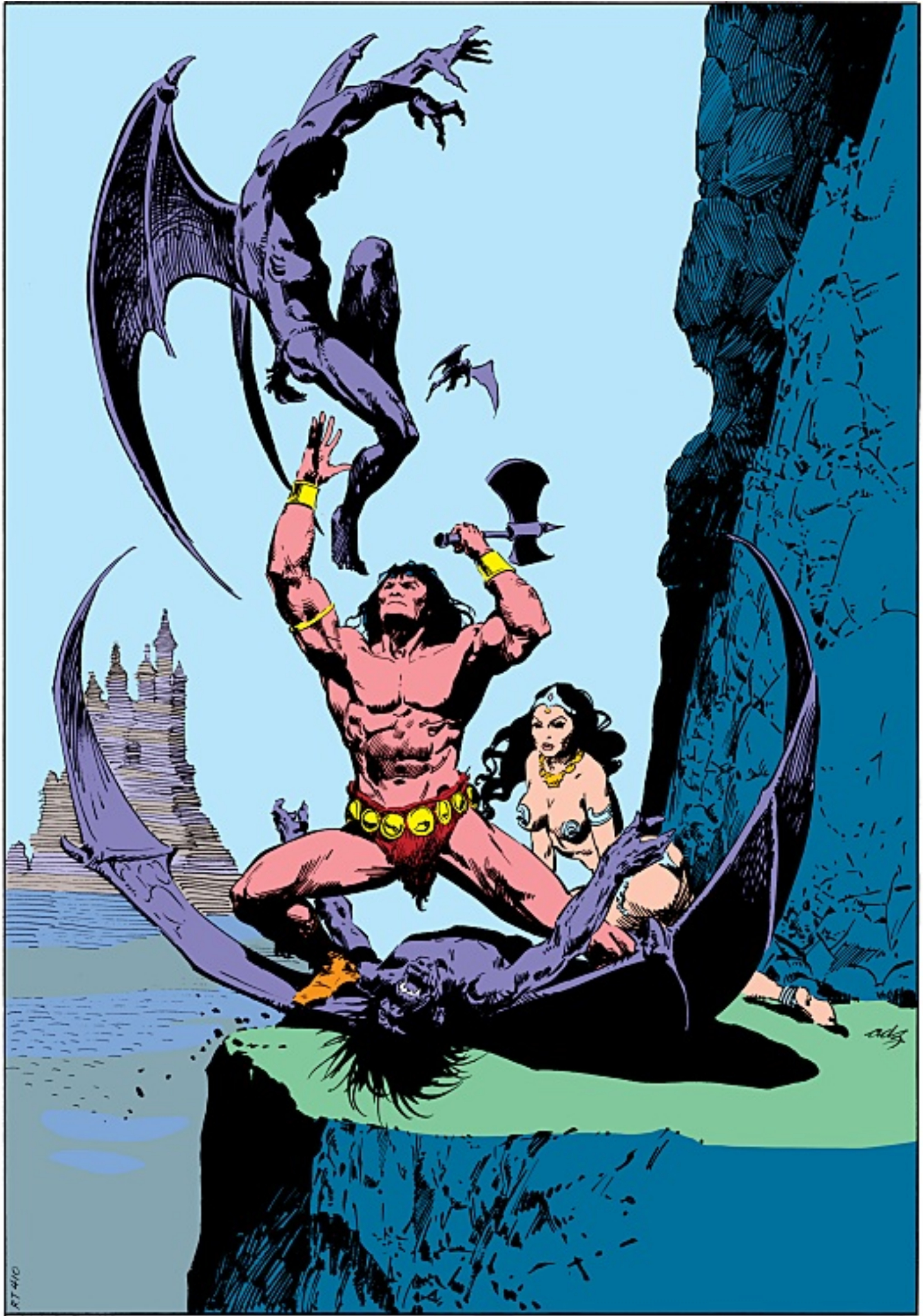
NEXT ISSUE: **CONAN THE AVENGER!**

CARMINE INFANTINO & DANNY BULANADI



FRANC REYES

JOHN BUSCEMA & BOB McLEOD



TONY DeZUNIGA

KEITH POLLARD & AUBRY BRADFORD

MADZ-CASTRILLO

KING CONAN

c/o MARVEL COMICS GROUP
575 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022

ROY THOMAS
EDITOR
MARK GRUENWALD
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Roy:

"The Black Sphinx of Nebthu" (KING CONAN #2) was very good. The team of John Buscema and Ernie Chan really work magic together. I like very much the way you remember to use continuity in your tales; the relationship between father and son is a rare thing to see these days. Most times, fathers and sons in comics are fighting constantly.

It's also invigorating to see the return of an old Conan foe. Most of the time, of course, his enemies are slain in a single story and never pop up again. Thoth-Amon can put some of the modern-day Marvel villains to shame. His ambition may have been told many times, but he is one of the few who can back up his claims.

Charles David Haskell
15 W. 139th St., 4R
New York, NY 10037

True enough, C.D., but if and when the Stygian master mage appears again, it will have to be in a story dealing with an earlier period in Conan's life. For, with this issue, Thoth-Amon is dead... period. That's the way L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter saw it several years ago when they first wrote the story "Shadows in the Skull," and we see no reason to gainsay them. After all, Robert E. Howard himself used Thoth-Amon in only a couple of tales, and in one of these he was an offstage character at that; so the legend of Thoth-Amon as Conan's "great foe" is primarily a de Camp/Carter addendum to the Conan saga, and if *they* don't know when he dies, who does? Certainly not your beleaguered Bullpen!
—R.T.

Dear Marvel,

What can I say about KING CONAN #2? I wanted to write to you about your great, fantastic, superb, colorfully collected and illustrated publication, but I was stumped as to wnat to say. What? Oh, I *did*, didn't I?

Tom Salzberg
11 Hedwig Ct.
W. Hartford, CN 06107

You did? —R.T.

Dear Marvel:

This is the third time I've written to tyou. First, I'd like you to know that of all the Marvel mags I buy, SAVAGE SWORD has become my favorite. But I'm also picking up on the 40¢ color comic CONAN THE BARBARIAN and now KING CONAN. I haven't read any of the novels, but I don't need to; your versions are better. By the way, my paper doesn't carry the "Conan" strip either daily or on Sunday. I'd like to change that, but I don't know how to go about doing it. May I add that I'm looking forward to the Conan movie, also?

William Wolanin
697 Arlington Av.
New Castle, PA 16101

You certainly may, William, especially since the Hollywood trade papers just the other day announced that filming will begin January 12, 1981. We know, we know — the movie was originally scheduled to begin principal photography, as they say in the film biz, in January of *'80*, but these things take time. (So far, pushing five years!)

As to the "Conan" newspaper strip, we'd simply suggest that you drop a line to the Comics Page Editor of your local paper and ask him to start carrying the strip, which is distributed by the Register and Tribune Syndicate of Des Moines, Iowa, who also distribute "Spider-Man," "The Hulk," "Family Circus," and other popular strips.

But we'd like to repeat in closing what we always say to CONAN readers who tell us they've not read the original Robert E. Howard novels: *Read* them! We're hardly ashamed of our own contribution to the Conan canon over the past ten years, but the fact remains that the original Conan — just like the real Tarzan, or the actual Sherlock Holmes or James Bond — must be read in the original prose edition to get the full flavor. Matter of fact, when you do so, you'll be in a better position to judge our work as a whole. We envy you, friend — you're in for a first-class treat! —R.T.

THE MIGHTY MARVEL CHECKLIST!

☐ **TWO-IN-ONE #70** — The Thing vs. Live Wire and Shellshock!
☐ **MOON KNIGHT #2** — The Scythe of the Slasher!
☐ **SPIDER-WOMAN #33** — Fear stalks 'Frisco!
☐ **STAR TREK #9** — "Plague of Madness!"
☐ **MACHINE MAN #18** — *Alpha Flight* strikes!
☐ **KING CONAN #4** — "Shadows In The Skull!"
☐ **SPIDER-MAN #211** — Face-to-face with *Sub-Mariner!*
☐ **CAPTAIN AMERICA #252** — Batroc and Mr. Hyde! Plus: Cap's secret life!
☐ **THOR #302** — Locus, the Geometric Man!
☐ **MICRONAUTS #24** — Victims of Computrex, the Killer Computer!
☐ **GHOST RIDER #51** — Murder, kidnaping, the supernatural... and Ghost Rider!
☐ **HULK #254** — Hulk vs. the U Foes!
☐ **DR. STRANGE #44** — Death-duel with the Shadowqueen!
☐ **SHE-HULK #11** — *Mobius!*
☐ **AVENGERS #202** — Showdown with Ultron!
☐ **CONAN #117** — "Vengeance of the Sorcerer!"
☐ **MARVEL TALES #122** — (Reprints Spidey #145) *Gwen Stacy Lives!*
☐ **MARVEL'S GREATEST #95** — (Reprints FF #115) Reed — slave of the Over-Mind!
☐ **X-MEN #140** — The man-eating *Wendigo* strikes!
☐ **FANTASY MASTERPIECES #13** — (Reprints Silver Surfer #13 and Warlock #10) The Surfer faces the Doomsday Man while Warlock and *Thanos* team up!!
☐ **ROM #13** — The Plunderer! And beginning: *Saga of the Spaceknights!*
☐ **TALES TO ASTONISH #13** — (Reprints Sub-Mariner #13) Final battle for the Serpent Crown!
☐ **IRON MAN #141** — The malevolence of Force!
☐ **MARVEL TEAM-UP #100** — Double-sized 100th issue! Featuring *Spider-Man*, the *FF*, *Storm*, and the *Black Panther!*
☐ **FANTASTIC FOUR #225** — Guest-starring *the Mighty Thor!*
☐ **POWER MAN AND IRON FIST #66** — Sabretooth and the Constrictor!
☐ **PETER PARKER #49** — Introducing: the Smuggler! Plus, a *White Tiger* mini-series begins!
☐ **DEFENDERS #90** — The Defenders plus *Daredevil!*
☐ **SUPER ACTION #26** — (Reprints Avengers #65) "The Swordsman Strikes!"
☐ **AMAZING ADVENTURES #13** — (Reprints all of X-Men #7) "The Blob joins the Evil Mutants!"
☐ **STAR WARS #42** — Part IV of *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK!*
☐ **MASTER OF KUNG FU #95** — Cultists, cyborgs, and spies!
☐ **MARVEL PREMIERE #57** — Proudly we present... *Dr. Who!*
☐ **SGT. FURY #161** — (Reprints Sgt. Fury #64) "The Peacemonger!"
☐ **WHAT IF #24** — "What If Gwen Stacy Had Never Died!"
☐ **BATTLESTAR GALACTICA #22** — In pursuit of the Food Pirates!
☐ **SPIDER-MAN ANNUAL #14** — Guest-stars *Drs. Strange* and *Doom!*

MARVEL MAGAZINES

☐ **CRAZY #68** — Yock it up with "American Giggles!"; "Dupes of Haggard!"; "Sugar Junkies!" (starring the Speedies); Teen-Hulk; Obnoxio and more!
☐ **SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN #58** — The climax of the *Sword of Skelos* saga.
☐ **HOWARD THE DUCK #8** — Howard and Bev face the Grey Panther! Plus, *Marshall Rogers'* "Duck Man," a riotous spoof of our Distinguished Competitor's caped crusader.

COVER PENCILER & INKER: JOHN BUSCEMA

Stan Lee PRESENTS:

KING CONAN

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD

ROY THOMAS — WRITER/EDITOR
JOHN BUSCEMA — ARTIST/ILLUSTRATOR
DANNY BULANADI — INKER/EMBELLISHER
JOE ROSEN — LETTERER
GEORGE ROUSSOS — COLORIST
LOUISE JONES — CONSULTING EDITOR
JIM SHOOTER — EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

THE BATTLE OF YANYOGA IS OVER*... THOTH-AMON HAS PERISHED AND SCATTERED LIKE DUST TO THE FOUR WINDS... AND NOW THE ARMY OF AQUILONIA IS HEADED NORTH AGAIN, FROM THE PLACE WHICH MEN CALL THE WORLD'S EDGE...

WHAT'S WRONG, YOUR MAJESTY-- IF I MAY BE SO BOLD?

YOU LOOK FAR TOO SOMBRE FOR A MAN WHO'S RECENTLY SLAIN HIS WORST ENEMY, AND NOW CARRIES NEWS OF THE TRIUMPH BACK TO HIS ROYAL CAPITAL.

THAT'S JUST IT, TROCERO...

* LAST ISSUE, --ROY.

WE CARRY THAT NEWS FAR TOO SLOWLY TO SUIT ME.

IT'S BEEN WELL NIGH A YEAR, AFTER ALL, THAT I'VE BEEN SEPARATED FROM ZENOBIA.

AH, SO MY KING DOES MISS HIS QUEEN, EH?

I MUST CONFESS, SIRE, I DOUBTED ANY ONE WOMAN COULD EVER MEAN SO MUCH TO YOU.

SO DID I, COUNT. BUT WHEN YOU'VE LIVED WITH A WOMAN SO LONG... HAD THREE CHILDREN BY HER...

WELL, DAMN IT ALL... I MISS HER!

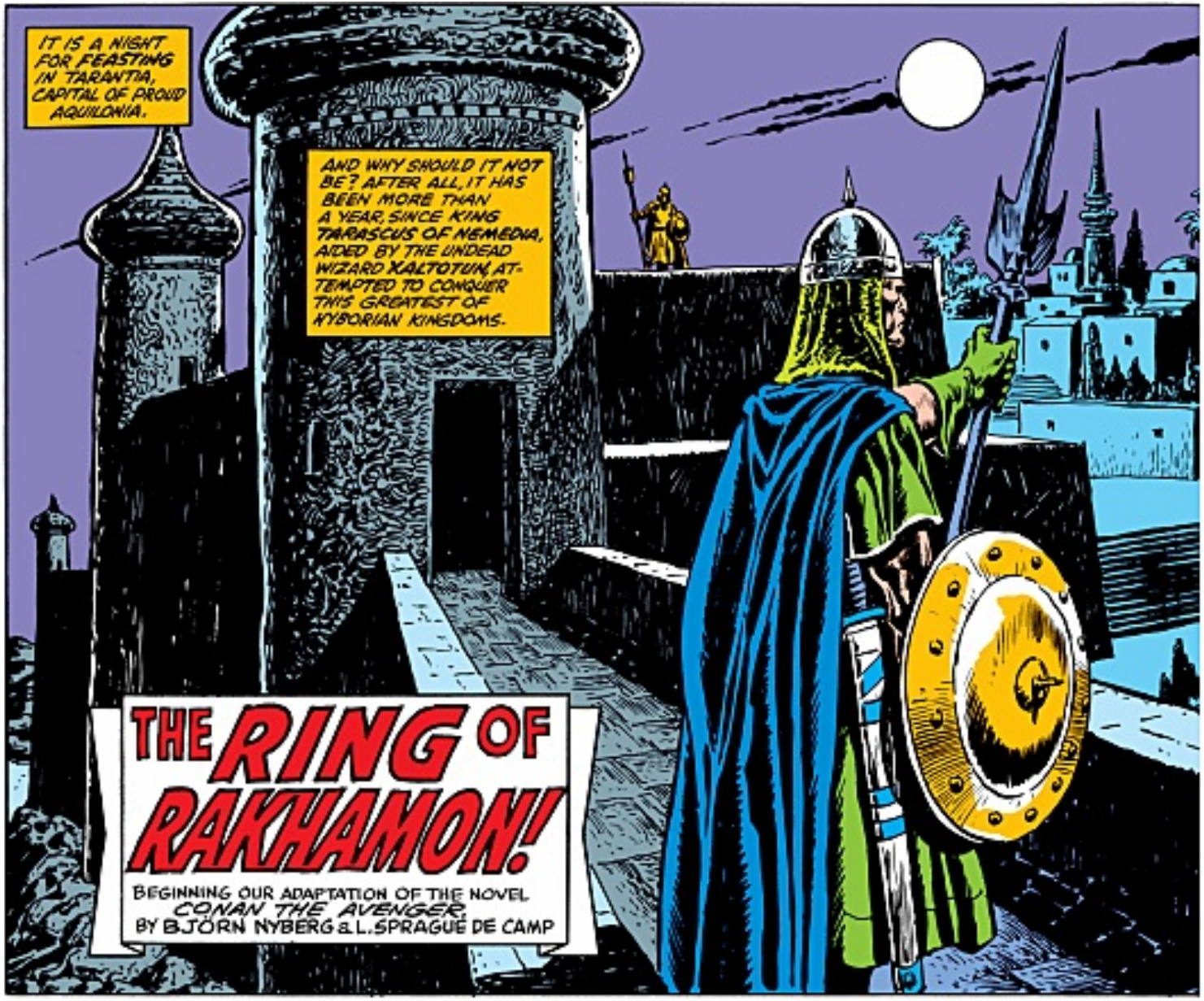
I'M WHAT YOU CIVILIZED MEN WOULD CALL... HOME-SICK...

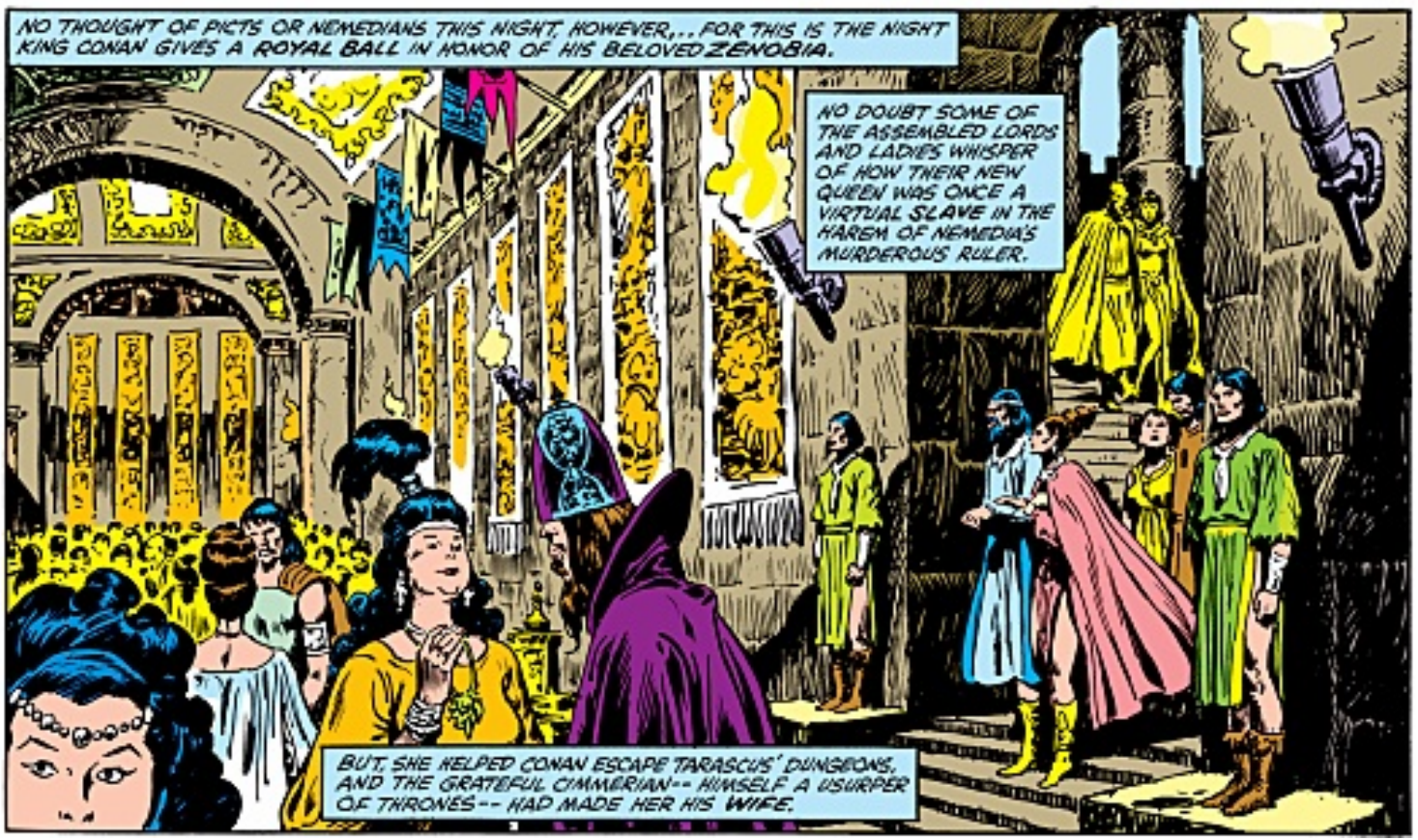
...UNLIKE YOUNG PRINCE COMN BACK THERE, FOR WHOM THIS WAS VERY NEARLY HIS FIRST TASTE OF REAL ADVENTURE!

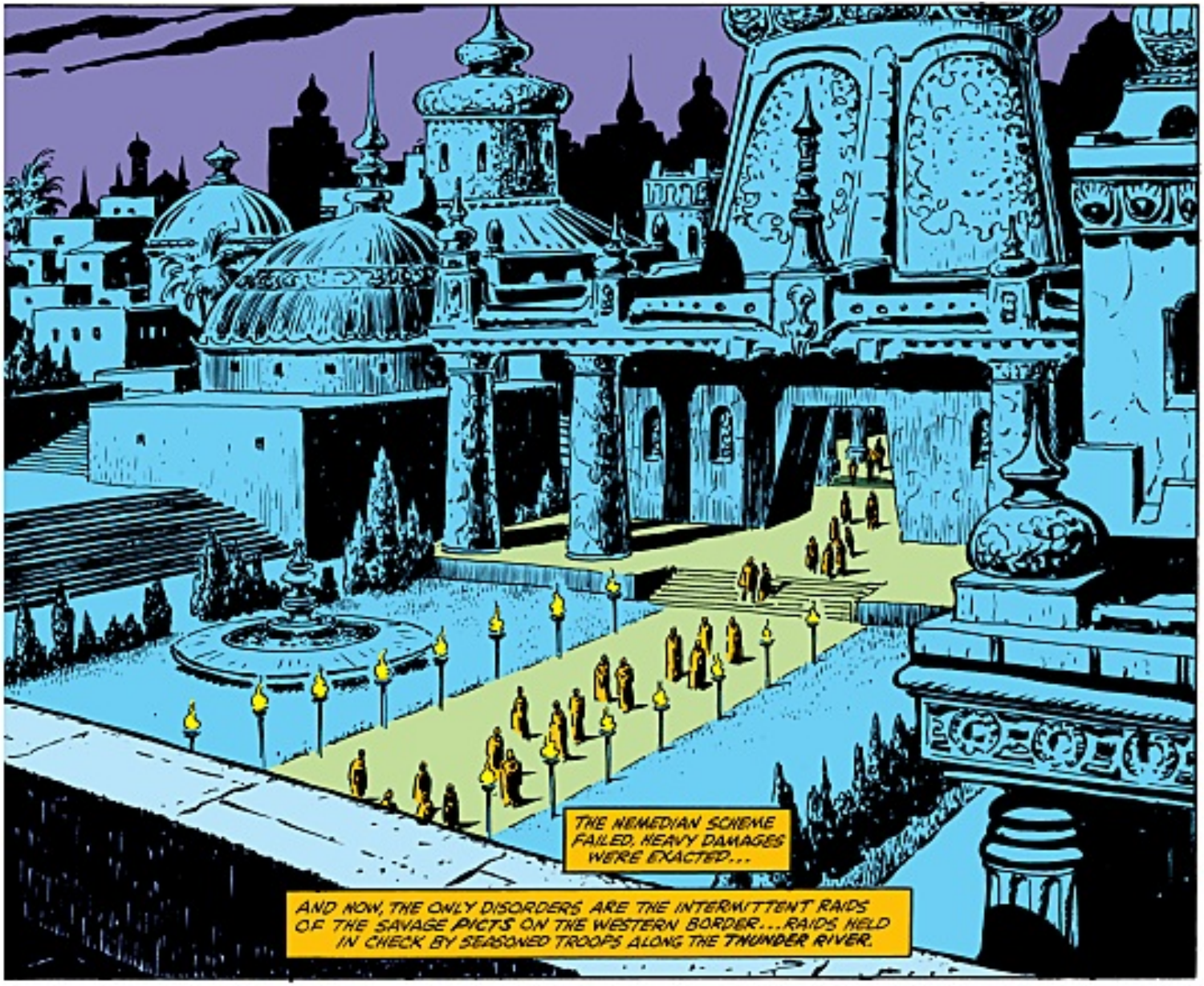
THAT NIGHT, ARMED SENTRIES PATROL THE OUTER PERIMETERS OF THE AQUILONIAN CAMP...
FOR, FOOLISH THE MAN IN THIS HYBORIAN AGE WHO LOWERS HIS GUARD, EVEN WHEN ALL HIS FOES SEEM DEAD OR DEFEATED,
WITHIN THE CAMP, HOWEVER, KING CONAN'S MIND IS ELSEWHERE...
I SWEAR I DON'T UNDERSTAND MY FATHER SOMETIMES, COUNT TROCERO...
FROM WHAT LITTLE HE'S TOLD ME, HIS YOUTH WAS FULL OF DANGER, EXCITEMENT...AND HE REVELED IN IT.
HE'S STILL TWICE THE FIGHTER OF ANY MAN ALIVE...
AT LEAST, YOUNG PRINCE!
...YET RATHER THAN ADD NEW CONQUESTS ON OUR ROAD NORTH, HE MARCHES STRAIGHT FOR HOME LIKE ANY TWENTY-YEAR-MAN EAGER ONLY TO COLLECT HIS PENSION!
YOU GREATLY EXAGGERATE YOUR SIRE'S MOOD, PRINCE CONN... BUT YOU'LL UNDERSTAND MORE, WHEN YOU GET OLDER.
OLDER! THAT'S WHAT EVERYONE ALWAYS SAYS!
AND ALWAYS WILL, BECAUSE IT'S ALWAYS TRUE.
YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER, AFTER ALL, HAVE BEEN THROUGH ADVENTURES AS PERILOUS AS EVEN THE PURSUIT OF THOTH-AMON, YOU KNOW.
YES, I'VE HEARD VAGUE HINTS OF THAT, BUT NO ONE HAS EVER TOLD ME THE FULL STORY.
THAT'S BECAUSE YOUR MOTHER, GENTLE SOUL, WOULD SOONER FORGET THEM...AND YOUR FATHER'S NOT GIVEN TO BOASTING.
I KNOW OF HOW HE MET HER, AND SAVED HER FROM THE MANOTAUR OF NEMEDIA...
BUT WILL YOU TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THAT?
WHY NOT? IT'S A LONG TREK NORTH.
IT BEGAN WHEN YOUR PARENTS HAD BEEN MARRIED ONLY A FEW MONTHS...AND YOU WERE NOT YET EVEN A TWINKLE IN YOUR FATHER'S STEEL-BLUE EYES...
THEN, COUNT TROCERO IS LOST IN THOUGHTS...AND MEMORIES...

AND WHEN HE SPEAKS AGAIN, HE RELATES HIS TALE ALMOST LIKE ONE IN A TRANCE, FOR WHOM THESE EVENTS ARE OCCURRING **NOW**, NOT NEARLY A DECADE AND A HALF AGONE:

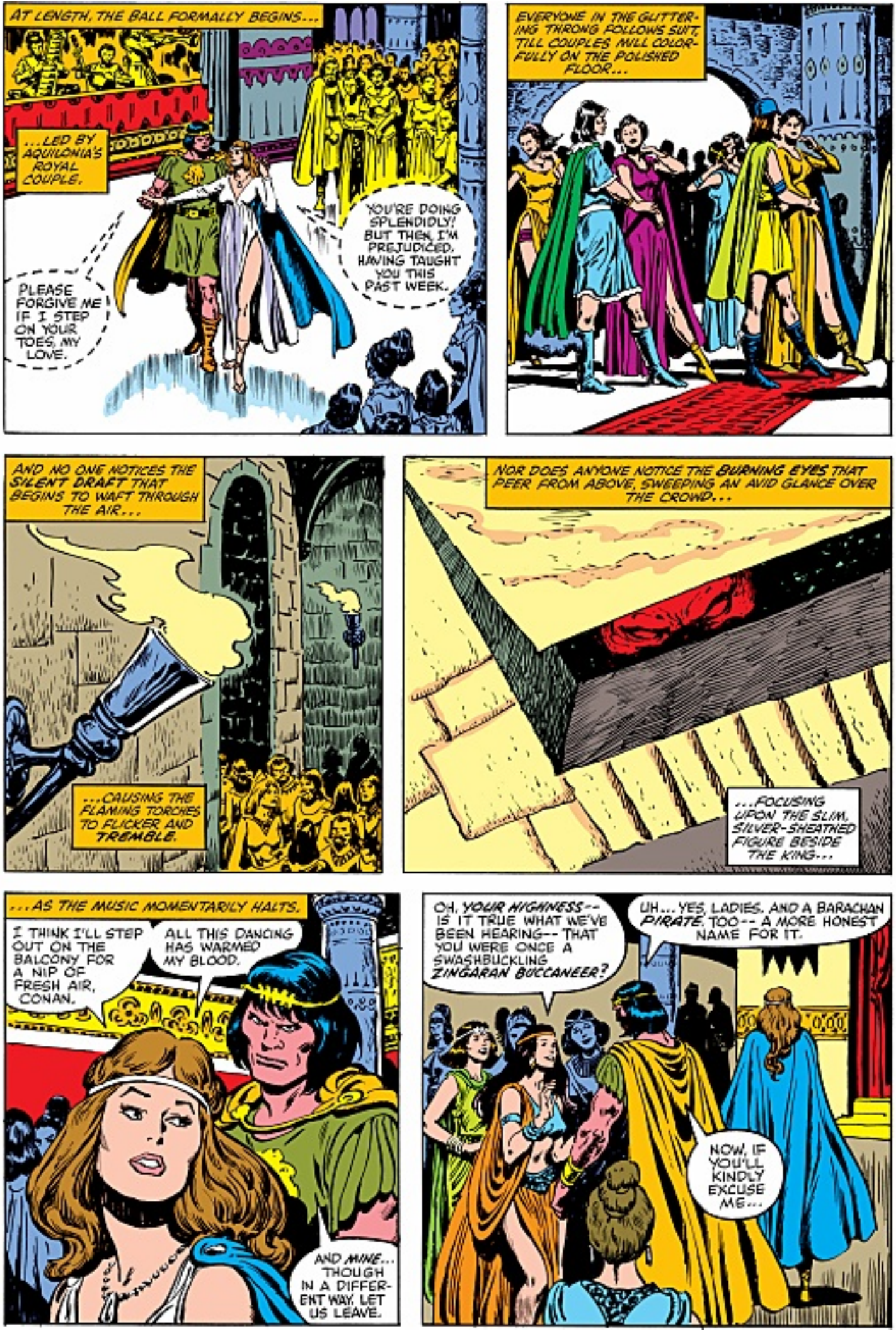
PROLOGUE:


IT IS A NIGHT FOR FEASTING IN TARANTIA, CAPITAL OF PROUD AQUILONIA.
AND WHY SHOULD IT NOT BE? AFTER ALL, IT HAS BEEN MORE THAN A YEAR, SINCE KING TARASCUS OF NEMEDIA, AIDED BY THE UNDEAD WIZARD XALTOTUN, ATTEMPTED TO CONQUER THIS GREATEST OF HYBORIAN KINGDOMS.
THE RING OF RAKHAMON!
BEGINNING OUR ADAPTATION OF THE NOVEL CONAN THE AVENGER, BY BJÖRN NYBERG & L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP


NO THOUGHT OF PICTS OR NEMEDIANS THIS NIGHT, HOWEVER... FOR THIS IS THE NIGHT KING CONAN GIVES A ROYAL BALL IN HONOR OF HIS BELOVED ZENOBIA.
NO DOUBT SOME OF THE ASSEMBLED LORDS AND LADIES WHISPER OF HOW THEIR NEW QUEEN WAS ONCE A VIRTUAL SLAVE IN THE HAREM OF NEMEDIA'S MURDEROUS RULER.
BUT, SHE HELPED CONAN ESCAPE TARASCUS' DUNGEONS, AND THE GRATEFUL CIMMERIAN -- HIMSELF A USURPER OF THRONES -- HAD MADE HER HIS WIFE.


THE NEMEDIAN SCHEME FAILED, HEAVY DAMAGES WERE EXACTED...
AND NOW, THE ONLY DISORDERS ARE THE INTERMITTENT RAIDS OF THE SAVAGE PICTS ON THE WESTERN BORDER...RAIDS HELD IN CHECK BY SEASONED TROOPS ALONG THE THUNDER RIVER.

HE HAS MASTERED HER HEART, THESE PAST FEW MONTHS OF MARRIAGE...
AND SHE, IN TURN, HAS MADE HIM MORE AMENABLE TO THE PLEASANTRIES OF SUCH COURTLY EVENTS AS THIS, WHICH ARE ALIEN TO HIS BARBAROUS NATURE:
SO PLEASED YOU COULD BE HERE THIS EVENING, COUNTESS ALBIONA.
AND YOUR NEW HUSBAND, COUNT NESTOR.
IT IS MY PLEASURE, YOUR MAJESTIES, TO DO HOMAGE TO AQUILONIA'S GRACIOUS QUEEN... AND TO MY OWN GOOD FRIEND.


AT LENGTH, THE BALL FORMALLY BEGINS...
...LED BY AQUILONIA'S ROYAL COUPLE.
PLEASE FORGIVE ME IF I STEP ON YOUR TOES, MY LOVE.
YOU'RE DOING SPLENDIDLY! BUT THEN, I'M PREJUDICED, HAVING TAUGHT YOU THIS PAST WEEK.
EVERYONE IN THE GLITTERING THRONG FOLLOWS SUIT, TILL COUPLES MILL COLORFULLY ON THE POLISHED FLOOR...
AND NO ONE NOTICES THE SILENT DRAFT THAT BEGINS TO WAFT THROUGH THE AIR...
...CAUSING THE FLAMING TORCHES TO FLICKER AND TREMBLE.
NOR DOES ANYONE NOTICE THE BURNING EYES THAT PEER FROM ABOVE, SWEEPING AN AVID GLANCE OVER THE CROWD...
...FOCUSING UPON THE SLIM, SILVER-SHEATHED FIGURE BESIDE THE KING...
...AS THE MUSIC MOMENTARILY HALTS.
I THINK I'LL STEP OUT ON THE BALCONY FOR A NIP OF FRESH AIR, CONAN.
ALL THIS DANCING HAS WARMED MY BLOOD.
AND MINE... THOUGH IN A DIFFERENT WAY. LET US LEAVE.
OH, YOUR HIGHNESS-- IS IT TRUE WHAT WE'VE BEEN HEARING-- THAT YOU WERE ONCE A SWASHBUCKLING ZINGARAN BUCCANEER?
UH... YES, LADIES. AND A BARACHAN PIRATE, TOO-- A MORE HONEST NAME FOR IT.
NOW, IF YOU'LL KINDLY EXCUSE ME...

BUT, I'VE HEARD YOU WERE ONCE A CHIEFTAIN OF THE WILD HORDES IN HALF-FABULOUS GHULISTAN, 'WAY OFF IN THE HIMELIAN MOUNTAINS!
NOT SO! WHAT HE REALLY DID, YEARS AGO, IS SAVE THE QUEEN OF KHAURAN FROM A BUNCH OF SHEMITE PLUNDERERS, ISN'T THAT RIGHT, SIRE?
I FEAR I MUST PLEAD GUILTY ON ALL COUNTS, LADIES.
BECOMING YOUR KING IS PROBABLY THE FIRST HONEST DAY'S WORK I'VE EVER DONE.
OH, YOUR MAJESTY... YOU ARE SO AMUSING!

NOW, FORGIVE ME, BUT I REALLY MUST JOIN MY QUEEN, SO--
EEEE

EEEEEEEEEE
ZENOBIA!
OUT OF MY WAY, MAN!
THE SCREAM IS ALREADY DWINDLING AS THE BARBARIAN-KING SPRINGS FORWARD, UPSETTING NOBLE GUESTS AND WINE-LADEN TABLES--

--AND, WHEN HE REACHES THE BALCONY IN PANTHER-ISH STRIDES, ONLY SECONDS LATER, ZENOBIA IS--
GONE!?
BUT--THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE!
INSTINCTIVELY, CONAN'S GLANCE RAKES THE UNSCALABLE SIDES OF THE PALACE, BUT SEES... NOTHING.

THEN, AS HE LIFTS HIS GAZE SKYWARD--
CROM'S DEVILS!

ZENOBIA...!

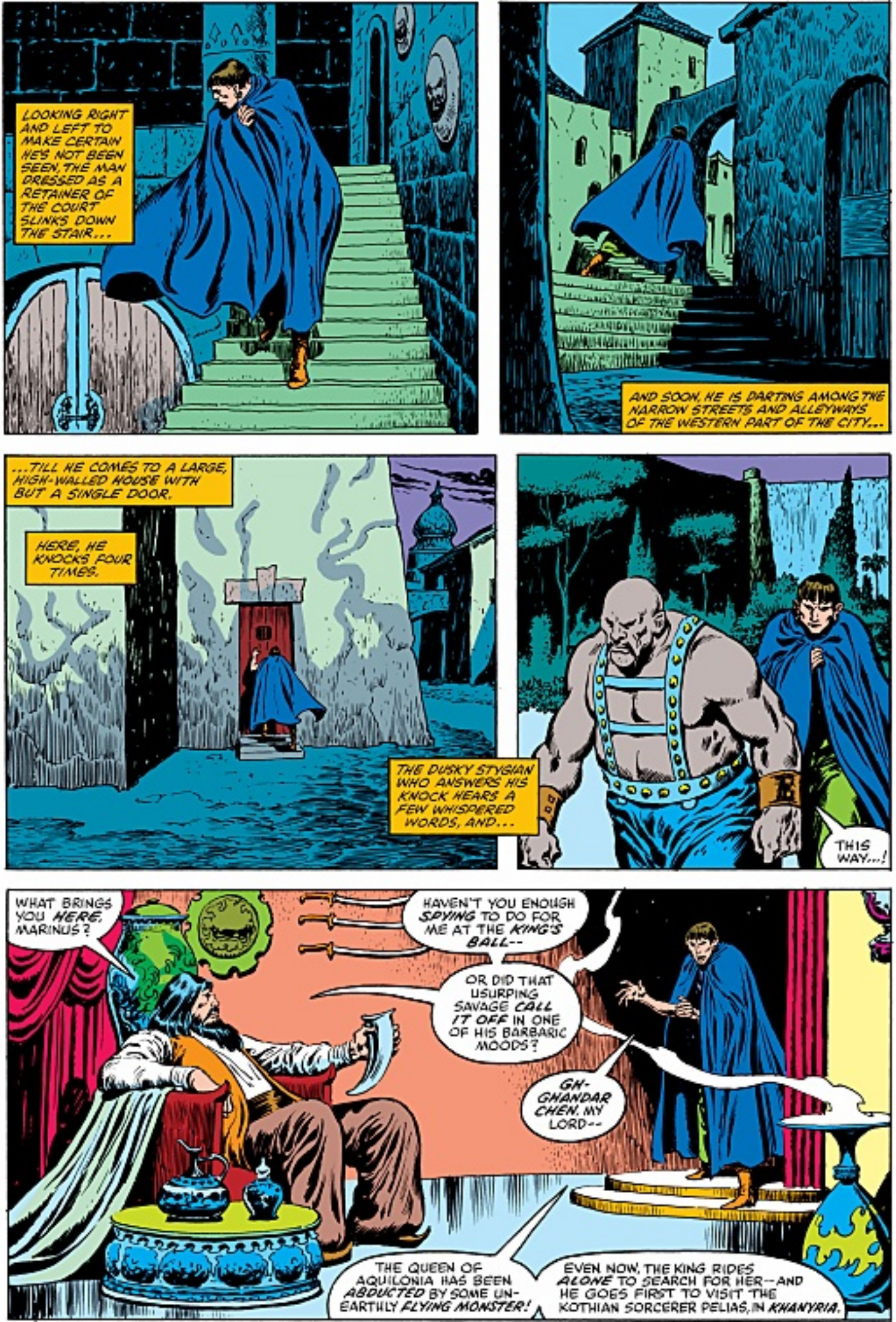
FOR A LONG MOMENT, CONAN STANDS TRANSFIXED.
THEN, AS HE STRIDES BACK INSIDE, HIS GUESTS SHRINK AWAY AS IF HE HAS BECOME THE VERY MONSTER THAT HAS CARRIED OFF HIS QUEEN.
WORDLESSLY, HE MAKES FOR THE WEAPON-LADEN NETHER WALL, WHERE HANGS A PLAIN BUT HEAVY BROADSWORD THAT HAS SERVED HIM WELL IN MANY A CAMPAIGN...

AND ONLY THEN DOES HE SPEAK...
FROM THIS HOUR, I AM NO LONGER YOUR KING-- UNTIL I HAVE RETURNED WITH MY STOLEN QUEEN!
IF I CANNOT DEFEND MY MATE, I AM NOT FIT TO RULE!
BUT, BY CROM, I WILL SEEK OUT THIS DEVIL, AND WREAK VENGEANCE UPON HIM, BE HE PROTECTED BY ALL THE ARMED HOSTS IN THE WORLD!

THEN, OPENING WIDE HIS MOUTH, THE KING VOICES A WEIRD AND TERRIBLE CALL THAT ECHOES SHUDDERINGLY THROUGH THE HALL...
IT RINGS LIKE THE CRY OF DOOMED SOULS...AND THE EERIE HORROR OF ITS TONES TURNS MANY A FACE ASHEN.

NEXT MOMENT, WITH A TIGERISH TREAD...HE IS GONE
WH-WHAT WAS THAT AWFUL SHOUT, THAT FROZE THE BLOOD IN MY VEINS?
THE BATTLE CRY OF THE CIMMERIAN TRIBES, MILADY.
IT IS VOICED ONLY WHEN THEY ARE ABOUT TO FLING THEMSELVES INTO BATTLE WITH UTTER ABANDON--AND WITH NO CONCERN OTHER THAN TO KILL.
I HEARD IT THIRTY YEARS AGO, WHEN THE BLACK-MANED BARBARIANS SWARMED OVER THE WALLS AT THE SACK OF VENARIUM--AND I HAD HOPED NEVER TO HEAR IT AGAIN!
MINUTES LATER...
BUT MY KING...
NO, PROSPERO--NO! I WILL TRAVEL ALONE!
IF I TAKE OUR LEGIONS WITH ME, OUR PEACE-LOVING NEIGHBOR NATIONS MAY SEIZE THE CHANCE TO STRIKE.

BUT, SIRE--WE CANNOT LET YOU RISK YOUR LIFE ON SUCH AN UNCERTAIN QUEST.
LET TROCERO AND ME RIDE WITH YOU, AT LEAST...!
NO, MY GOOD GENERAL AND FRIEND... I FEEL I'M DESTINED TO FREE MY QUEEN ALONE.
YOU SHALL COMMAND THE ARMY IN MY ABSENCE... TROCERO, THE KINGDOM.
IF I'M NOT BACK IN TWO YEARS--CHOOSE A NEW KING!
NOW, A HORSE, PROSPERO! I RIDE AT ONCE TO FIND PELIAS OF KOTH, WHO DWELLS IN KHANYRIA, IN KHORAJA.
WHAT, SIRE? THAT--WIZARD!?
AYE, THAT WIZARD WHO AIDED ME WHEN TSOTHA-LANTI HAD DEFEATED AND IMPRISONED ME, SEVERAL YEARS AGO. *
*"THE SCARLET CITADEL," IN SAVAGE SWORD #30. --ED.
I SMELL DARK SORCERY IN TONIGHT'S HAPPENINGS, MY FRIENDS; THAT FLYING CREATURE WAS NO EARTHLY BIRD.
I CARE LITTLE FOR WIZARDS, CROM AND MITRA KNOW--BUT NOW I NEED PELIAS' ADVICE.
I RIDE TONIGHT--GARBED AS A COMMON MERCENARY.


LOOKING RIGHT AND LEFT TO MAKE CERTAIN HE'S NOT BEEN SEEN, THE MAN DRESSED AS A RETAINER OF THE COURT SLINKS DOWN THE STAIR...
AND SOON, HE IS DARTING AMONG THE NARROW STREETS AND ALLEYWAYS OF THE WESTERN PART OF THE CITY...
...TILL HE COMES TO A LARGE, HIGH-WALLED HOUSE WITH BUT A SINGLE DOOR.
HERE, HE KNOCKS FOUR TIMES.
THE DUSKY STYGIAN WHO ANSWERS HIS KNOCK HEARS A FEW WHISPERED WORDS, AND...
THIS WAY...!
WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE, MARINUS?
HAVEN'T YOU ENOUGH SPYING TO DO FOR ME AT THE KING'S BALL--
OR DID THAT USURPING SAVAGE CALL IT OFF IN ONE OF HIS BARBARIC MOODS?
GH-GHANDAR CHEN, MY LORD--
THE QUEEN OF AQUILONIA HAS BEEN ABDUCTED BY SOME UNEARTHLY FLYING MONSTER!
EVEN NOW, THE KING RIDES ALONE TO SEARCH FOR HER--AND HE GOES FIRST TO VISIT THE KOTHIAN SORCERER PELIAS, IN KHANYRIA.

BY ERLIK! THIS IS NEWS INDEED!
FIVE OF MY BEST POISONERS HANG ON THE HILL OF EXECUTION, SO MUCH KITE'S MEAT--
--BUT NOW, CONAN WILL BE ALONE--AND IN FOREIGN LANDS?!
YES, MY LORD.
YOU HEARD, STYGIAN?
AYE, MY LORD GHANDAR.
RIDE SWIFTLY TO BARACCUS, WHO CAMPS ON THE YIVGA RIVER.
ORDER HIM TO TAKE AS MANY MEN AS HE NEEDS--AND SLAY CONAN BEFORE HE REACHES THAT SORCERER--DO YOU UNDERSTAND?
WELL DO I KNOW CONAN, MASTER--SINCE HE CRUSHED THE HOST OF PRINCE KATUMUN OUTSIDE KHORAJA*...
...AND I ALONE ESCAPED, ONLY TO BE SOLD INTO SLAVERY.
LONG HAVE I WAITED FOR MY REVENGE: IF POSSIBLE, I WILL SLAY THE DOG MYSELF!
I GO AT ONCE, MASTER!
*SEE "BLACK COLOSSUS," SAVAGE SWORD #2. --R.T.
THEN, WHEN HIS STYGIAN BONDSERVANT IS GONE, THE MAN CALLED GHUNDAR CHEN TAKES UP GOLDEN PEN AND PARCHMENT...
To King Yezdigerd, lord of Turan and the Eastern Empire...
AND, WHEN HE HAS FINISHED...
RIDE SWIFTLY TO AGHRAPUR, MARINUS--AND TAKE THIS TO KING YEZDIGERD HIMSELF!
HE WILL REWARD US BOTH HANDSOMELY, I ASSURE YOU.
YES, MY LORD.
YES... VERY HANDSOMELY, INDEED...!

SOME DAYS LATER, WHILE THE SCORCHING AFTERNOON SUN CASTS SEARING RAYS ACROSS THE DESERT...
...A SOLITARY RIDER, WEARING A SNOWY KHALAT, HALTS WITHIN SIGHT OF DOMED BUILDINGS AND TOWERING WALLS.
KHANYRIA!
I'D THANK CROM--BUT I DOUBT MY SAVAGE NORTHERN GOD HELPED ME IN THE FIRST PLACE.

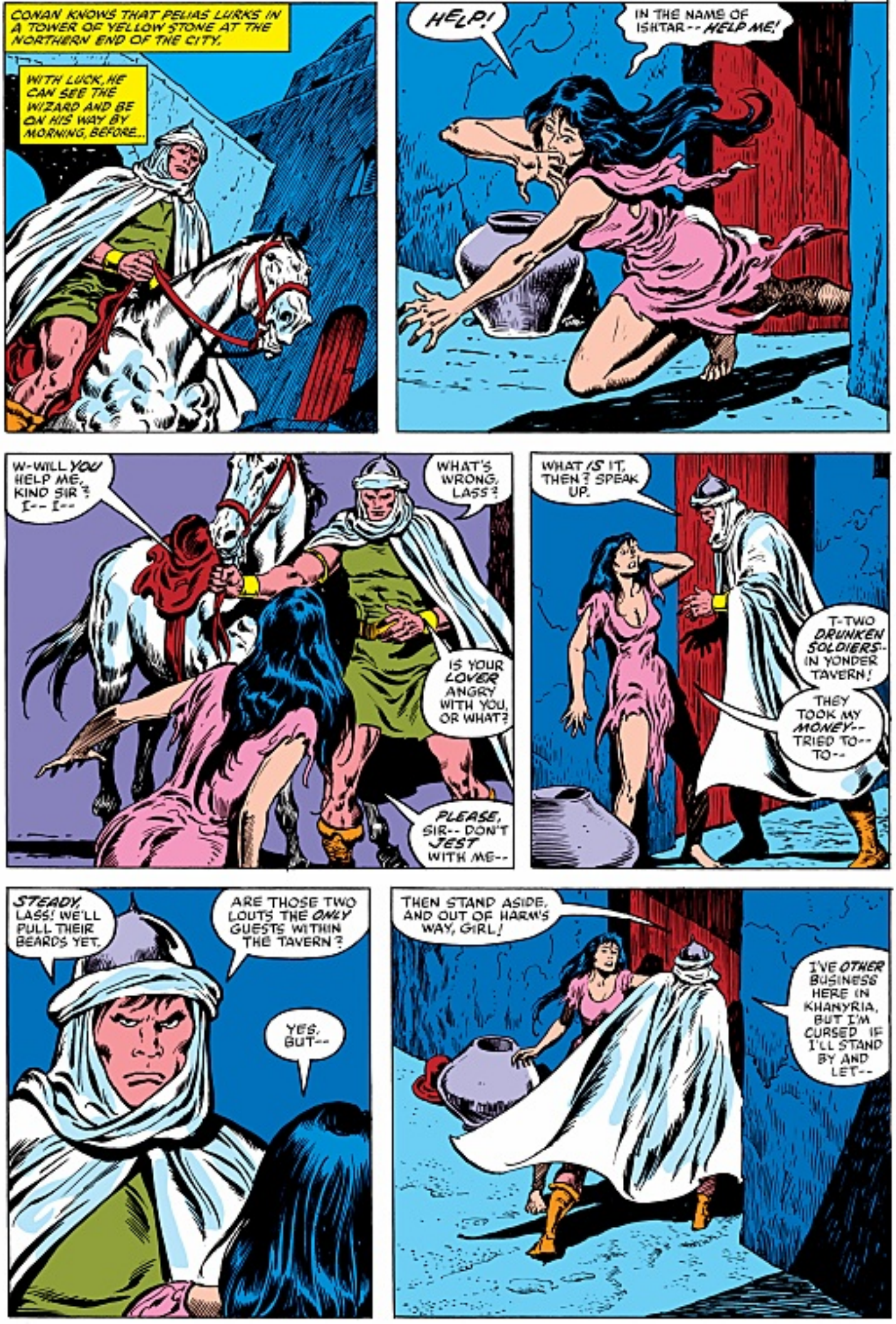
I JUST HOPE PELIAS IS IN HIS FULL SENSES, NOT LYING DRUNK ON HIS GOLDEN DIVAN.
WELL, IF HE IS, BY BADB, I'LL WAKEN HIM!

IN THE COBBLED MARKETPLACE OF THIS KHORAJAN CITY, A MOTLEY THRONG SWIRLS AND EDDIES...

I TELL YOU, LAD, WE'RE GETTING STRANGER WAYFARERS IN THIS CITY EVERY DAY!
AND, AT ITS WESTERN GATE...
UH... DON'T LOOK NOW, CAPTAIN CRASSIDES...

...BUT I DOUBT EVEN YOU'VE SEEN ANY STRANGER THAN THIS GROUP!
HMMMMPH...!
IT IS NOT THE CUSTOM OF THE KHANYRIAN CITY GUARD TO HALT POSSIBLE WOULD-BE TRADERS WITHOUT GOOD REASON.
STILL, CRASSIDES IS GLAD WHEN THE SEVEN MEN, MOSTLY TURANIANS, DISAPPEAR INTO THE PROFUSION OF SMOKY TAVERNS BEYOND.

THEN, EVEN AS THE SUN GLOWS ITS LAST...
LET ME IN, GATESMAN!
WHAT SEEK YOU HERE, ROGUE?
WE LET NO OUTLANDERS IN AT NIGHT, TO CUT OUR THROATS!
MY FRIEND...FOR WORDS LESS THAN THOSE, I HAVE SLIT A HUNDRED GULLETS.
LET ME IN--OR BY CROM, I'LL RAISE A HORDE TO SACK THIS BUNCH OF HOVELS!
NO NEED FOR ANGER, HORSEMAN; THIS GUARD IS NEW.
WHAT IS YOUR BUSINESS IN OUR CITY?
CALL ME ARUS--AND I SEEK PELIAS, THE SORCERER.
YOU MAY ENTER!
MOMENTS LATER, THE NEWCOMER CANTERS THROUGH...
...NOT DEIGNING EVEN TO GLANCE AT THOSE AROUND THE GATE.
WHY DID YOU LET HIM IN, CAPTAIN CRASSIDES? HE'S A NORTHERN BARBARIAN, FROM HIS LOOK AND ACCENT!
LIKE ANOTHER I HEARD OF SOME YEARS AGO...
*FIERCE DESERT NOMADS.--R.T.
...WHO ONCE LED A BAND OF OUTLAW ZUAGIRS* AGAINST THE SHEMITE CITY-STATES SOUTH OF HERE.
THIS FELLOW MIGHT BE ONE OF THAT SORT... THOUGH HARDLY THE SAME MAN, OF COURSE.
BUT ALONE, HE CAN DO US LITTLE HARM, WHATEVER HIS INTENT.
AND IF HE MEANS US ILL--WHY, THEN, PELIAS WILL KNOW IT BY HIS ARCANE ARTS AND TAKE PROPER MEASURES.
NOW DO YOU BEGIN TO SEE?


CONAN KNOWS THAT PELIAS LURKS IN A TOWER OF YELLOW STONE AT THE NORTHERN END OF THE CITY.
WITH LUCK, HE CAN SEE THE WIZARD AND BE ON HIS WAY BY MORNING, BEFORE..
HELP!
IN THE NAME OF ISHTAR -- HELP ME!
W-WILL YOU HELP ME, KIND SIR? I-- I--
WHAT'S WRONG, LASS?
IS YOUR LOVER ANGRY WITH YOU, OR WHAT?
PLEASE, SIR-- DON'T JEST WITH ME--
WHAT IS IT, THEN? SPEAK UP.
T-TWO DRUNKEN SOLDIERS-- IN YONDER TAVERN!
THEY TOOK MY MONEY-- TRIED TO-- TO--
STEADY, LASS! WE'LL PULL THEIR BEARDS YET.
ARE THOSE TWO LOUTS THE ONLY GUESTS WITHIN THE TAVERN?
YES, BUT--
THEN STAND ASIDE, AND OUT OF HARM'S WAY, GIRL!
I'VE OTHER BUSINESS HERE IN KHANYRIA, BUT I'M CURSED IF I'LL STAND BY AND LET--

EH? WHY DO YOU SHUT THE DOOR BEHIND ME, LASS? ARE YOU AFRAID THAT--
MITRA CURSE ME FOR A MUTTON-BRAINED FOOL!
A TRAP!
A CIVILIZED MAN WOULD BE STUNNED BY SURPRISE ONE SECOND AT SUCH A SIGHT--
--THEN CUT DOWN THE NEXT, AS ARMED MEN RUSHED SWIFTLY UPON HIM--
SLAY HIM!
--BUT NOT THE GIANT CIMMERIAN.
HERE, TURANIAN DOGS!
UNNNH--!
OWWWH!
ALREADY, CONAN IS COUNTING.
EVEN IN THE TWILIGHT GLOOM, CONAN'S SHARP EYES CAN SEE THERE ARE SEVEN ALIGNED AGAINST HIM.
TWO ARE DONE FOR THE MOMENT, NURSING PAINFUL BRUISES...

...AND THIS THIRD WILL STAY DOWN EVEN LONGER.
ARRRR
STILL, THERE IS NO TIME FOR CONAN TO DRAW HIS GREAT SWORD...
YET, WITH A MUSCLE-WRENCHING HEAVE--
--HE INSTANTLY MAKES USE OF WHAT'S AT HAND.
AND NOW HE HAS TIME TO UNSHEATHE HIS BLADE!
A RED MIST SWIMS BEFORE HIS EYES-- HIS BARBARIAN BLOOD ROUSED BY THIS TREACHEROUS AMBUSH--
"AND, WHEN ONE OF THE FLAILING TURANIANS REACHES FOR HIS OWN FALLEN WEAPON--

--CONAN GIVES HIM CRUSHED RIBS TO NURSE FOR THE NEXT SIXMONTH.
YYOWWRR

THAT LEAVES BUT THREE IN FIGHTING CONDITION, HE MUSES...

AAAAAA
...NO, TWO!

THEN, AT LAST, WORDS FROM OTHER LIPS THAN CONAN'S OWN...
I SWORE THIS DAY WOULD COME, YOU LOW-BORN DOG!
I KNOW THAT VOICE, BY THE GODS!

BARACCUS! BUT YOU'RE AN AQUILONIAN BORN, THOUGH YOU NOW WEAR THE LIVERY OF A TURANIAN!
AYE! YOU EXILED ME, LONG MONTHS AGO, FOR PLOTTING WITH THE OPHIREANS AGAINST YOU.
NOW, I'LL EVEN THAT SCORE!
YOU SHOULD HAVE ATTACKED ME IN BROAD DAYLIGHT, TRAITOROUS FOOL...

IN THE DARK--
EEEIII
--NO MAN IS THE EQUAL OF CONAN OF CIMMERIA!
NO MAN, BARBARIAN--
--BUT MENFA OF LUXUR, BY SET!
NNNFF!
YOU SEE--I HAVE DWELT--UNNH!--AMONG THE NIGHTED TOMBS OF MY NATIVE LAND--
--AND MY CAT EYES--ARE EVEN MORE ATTUNED TO DARKNESS--THAN YOUR OWN!
I--REMEMBER YOU--FROM THE HORDES--OF PRINCE KATUMUN--UGNNH!--
THEN LET ME--BE THE FACE YOU SEE BEFORE YOU--TO GUIDE YOU INTO THE LAND OF SHADES!
IF IT--IS, STYGIAN--

--IT WILL BE BECAUSE YOU ARE THERE FOR MANY YEARS--
--BEFORE ME!
OOOFF!
NOW, YOU SCHEMING DEVIL--
--THE TABLES ARE TURNED!
TELL ME WHO--MMMFF!--SENT YOU AFTER ME, OR I'LL--
BUT THE GREAT-MUSCLED STYGIAN FIGHTS BACK DESPERATELY--AND CONAN KNOWS IT IS KILL OR BE KILLED.
AND WHEN THAT IS THE CHOICE...FOR THE CIMMERIAN, IT IS NO CHOICE AT ALL.
MURDEROUS JACKAL!
BUT MENFA OF LUXUR CAN NO LONGER HEAR.
INDEED, SEVERAL ARE DEAD, THE OTHERS FLED, WHEN ABRUPTLY--
OH, MERCY!--
--WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO MY FINE HOUSE?
BLOOD ALL OVER--FURNITURE RUINED--!
YOU HAD A HAND IN THIS, YOU YAPPING DOG!
THEY COULDN'T HAVE SET THIS AMBUSH WITHOUT YOUR HELP!
M-MERCY, MILORD! THEY TH-THREATENED TO CUT MY THROAT OTHERWISE--I SWEAR THEY DID--!

ENOUGH! BE GLAD I DON'T FLAY YOU ALIVE!
NOW, FETCH SOME FOOD AND DRINK-- ALSO SOME CLEAN CLOTHS TO BIND UP THESE SCRATCHES!
YES-- YES, MILORD!
...KILLING DRIES A MAN'S THROATS, BY CROM.
NOW, TELL ME,-- WHERE'S THE GIRL WHO WAS HERE WITH THESE MEN BEFORE I ENTERED?
MILORD, AGAIN I SWEAR TO YOU--
--I NEVER SAW HER UNTIL SHE CAME HERE YESTERDAY, DRESSED IN OUTLANDISH GARMENTS. SHE--
LEAD ME TO HER ROOM-- AT ONCE!
AND, SHOULD THIS PROVE ANOTHER TRAP--!
IT WON'T, MILORD-- I SWEAR IT.
YOU SWEAR TOO MUCH, TAVERNER. JUST SHOW ME HER ROOM!
YES...
HERE IT IS, GOOD SIR.
OPEN THE DOOR WIDE-- SO I CAN SEE CLEARLY BEFORE I ENTER!
GOOD! THE ROOM'S TOO SMALL FOR A SECOND AMBUSH.
THE GIRL CHANGED HER GARB IN THIS ROOM, MILORD, AS YOU CAN PLAINLY SEE.
AS ISHTAR IS MY WITNESS, I KNOW NOTHING ELSE ABOUT HER!
EASY, MAN. I BELIEVE YOU. NOW GO!
BUT, AS CONAN LOOKS AT THE GLEAMING SILKS...A TURBAN STRIP WITH AN EMERALD PIN...A FILMY VEIL...HE STANDS SILENT WITH STARTLED RECOGNITION.
THIS IS THE GARB OF A TURANIAN NOBLEWOMAN..., FROM THE GREAT EASTERN EMPIRE OF KING YEZDIGERO!

AS HE RIDES FORTH, SOON AFTERWARD, ONLY A LITTLE STIFFENED BY WOUNDS WHICH WOULD FELL AN ORDINARY MAN FOR DAYS, CONAN IS PUZZLED.
HE KNOWS WELL THAT MANY MEN OF DIFFERENT CREEDS, RACES, AND STATION LUST FOR HIS BLOOD.
ONLY TROCERO AND PROSPERO KNEW OF HIS MISSION AND DESTINATION, HOWEVER... AND THEIR LOYALTY IS BEYOND QUESTION.

STILL, SOMETHING OR SOMEONE BROUGHT BARACCUS FROM THE WEST AND THE TURANIAN WOMAN FROM THE EAST TOGETHER TO TRY TO SLAY HIM.

BUT NOW, EMERGING UPON A WIDE, DESERTED SQUARE, HE SPIES THE OUTLINE OF A SPIRED EDIFICE, POINTING LIKE A GOLDEN ARROW AIMED AT HEAVEN'S HEART...
THE TOWER WHERE PELIAS SECRETS HIMSELF FROM THE UNDESIRED COMPANY OF HIS FELLOW MAN!

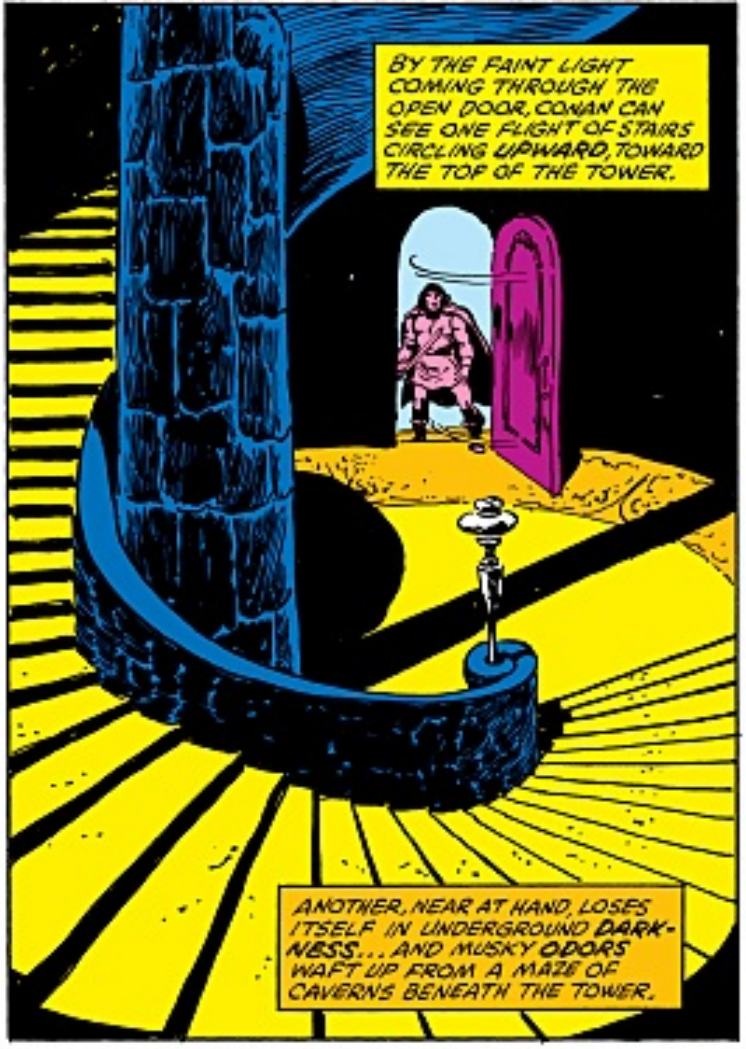
A BROAD EXPANSE OF TRIMMED GARDENS AND LAWNS SURROUNDS THE GREAT YELLOW TOWER... BUT NO GATES ARE PRESENT, OR NEEDED.
AFTER ALL, MORRID LEGENDS, BIRTHED IN TRUTH, HAVE TAUGHT THE MEN OF KHANYRIA TO KEEP AWAY FROM THIS WIZARD'S ABODE.
AYE, MEN...

...BUT WHAT COULD THUS AFFECT CONAN'S MOUNT?
YOU DON'T LIKE SORCERERS MUCH EITHER, DO YOU?
WHOA, BOY!
WHINN!!!

CAN'T SAY I BLAME YOU MUCH.
PERHAPS, HE MUSES AS HE STALKS TOWARD THE TOWER, PELIAS HAS UNHOLY COMPANY THIS NIGHT...
FOR, NECROMANTIC RITES OFTEN DRAW NAMELESS MONSTROSITIES TO THEM, AS THE SMELL OF CARRION ATTRACTS VULTURES.
THE CIMMERIAN HAS MET HIS SHARE OF SUCH.

REACHING THE TOWER, HE NOTES THAT ITS COLOR IS CAUSED BY AN ABUNDANCE OF SMALL GOLDEN COINS SET IN PLASTER.
NONE OF THE COINS LOOK FAMILIAR... AND ALL HAVE THE LOOK OF GREAT AGE.
CONAN KNOWS THAT SUCH ANCIENT GOLD IS CONSIDERED QUITE VALUABLE IN MAKING MAGIC... AND HE SHIVERS.

ALL THE SAME, HE TRIES THE IRON DOOR...
...WHICH SWINGS SILENTLY INWARD.

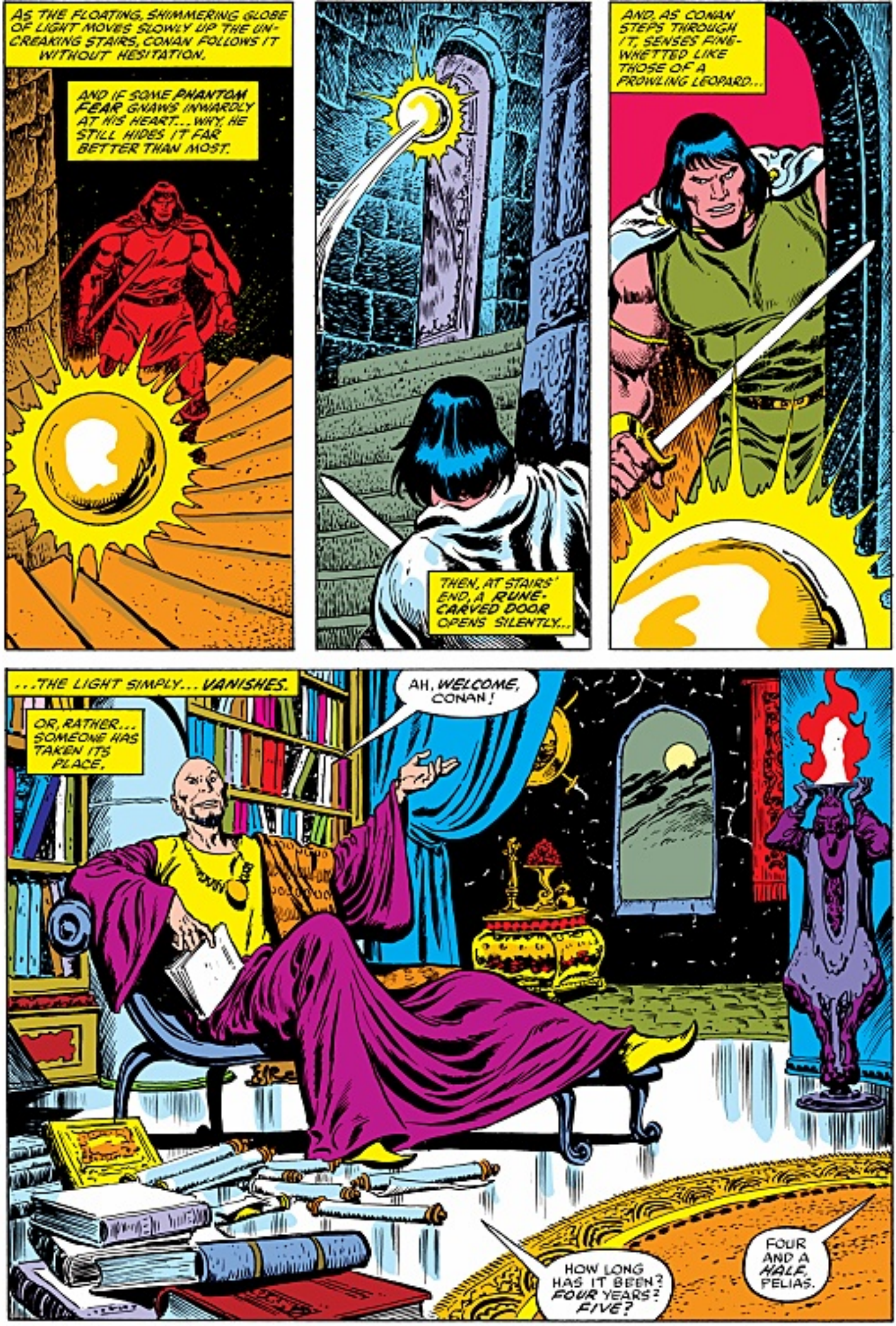

BY THE FAINT LIGHT COMING THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR, CONAN CAN SEE ONE FLIGHT OF STAIRS CIRCLING UPWARD, TOWARD THE TOP OF THE TOWER.
ANOTHER, NEAR AT HAND, LOSES ITSELF IN UNDERGROUND DARKNESS... AND MUSKY ODORS WAFT UP FROM A MAZE OF CAVERNS BENEATH THE TOWER.

THE CIMMERIAN IS RECALLING SIMILAR ODORS IN THE HAUNTED CATACOMBS OF THE DEAD CITY OF PTEION, IN STYGIA, WHEN SUDDENLY--
WELCOME, CONAN! MOUNT THE STAIRS LEADING UPWARD-- AND FOLLOW THE LIGHT.
PELIAS? WHERE ARE YOU, MAN-- IF IT'S YOU?
AND WHAT LIGHT ARE YOU--?

MACHA AND NEMAIN!
WITHOUT WARNING, A SWIRL OF LIGHT APPEARS BEFORE HIS VERY EYES...

...SWIFTLY FORMING ITSELF INTO A GLOWING BALL.
PELIAS-- I LIKE NOT THIS KIND OF MUMMERY, AS YOU KNOW WELL!

PELIAS...?


AS THE FLOATING, SHIMMERING GLOBE OF LIGHT MOVES SLOWLY UP THE UN-CREAKING STAIRS, CONAN FOLLOWS IT WITHOUT HESITATION.
AND IF SOME PHANTOM FEAR GNAWS INWARDLY AT HIS HEART... WHY, HE STILL HIDES IT FAR BETTER THAN MOST.
THEN, AT STAIRS' END, A RUNE-CARVED DOOR OPENS SILENTLY...
AND, AS CONAN STEPS THROUGH IT, SENSES FINE-WHETTED LIKE THOSE OF A PROWLING LEOPARD...
...THE LIGHT SIMPLY... VANISHES.
OR, RATHER... SOMEONE HAS TAKEN ITS PLACE.
AH, WELCOME, CONAN!
HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN? FOUR YEARS? FIVE?
FOUR AND A HALF, PELIAS.

BUT, I SEE YOU ARE WOUNDED...AND LATELY, TOO.
DRINK THIS, MY FRIEND. IT IS MADE FROM THE SECRET HERBS OF THE MISTY ISLES AND OF THE LANDS BEYOND KUSH.
IT WILL HEAL YOUR WOUNDS, AND EASE YOUR TIRED MUSCLES.
HUHN! MY VEINS -- THEY SEEM AFIRE --!
ONLY FOR A MOMENT, YOU SEE?
YES! ALREADY A VAST WEARINESS SEEMS LIFTED FROM MY SHOULDERS.
TRULY, PELIAS, THIS IS A MAGICAL BREW!
YES, IT IS RATHER POTENT... A COMPENDIUM OF RARE INGREDIENTS AND POWERFUL INCANTATIONS.
I WISH I'D POSSESSED IT MANY A FORMER TIME IN MY LIFE!

STILL, YOU DID NOT RIDE SO MANY LEAGUES FROM THE ROYAL PALACE OF AQUILONIA SIMPLY TO PARTAKE OF MY HOSPITALITY.
WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE, BOTH ALONE AND IN HASTE?
I'VE NOT HEARD OF ANY GREAT WARS IN THE NORTHWEST, IN WHICH YOU MIGHT NEED MY AID.
IF IT WERE ONLY A STRAIGHTFORWARD WAR, I WOULD NEVER ASK MAGICAL HELP.
BUT I FIND MYSELF PITTED AGAINST DARK AND UNKNOWN POWERS, PELIAS...
I NEED CLUES TO LEAD ME TO WHERE I CAN SMITE MY FOE--
--AYE, AND RESCUE MY QUEEN -- THE WOMAN I LOVE!
IN SHORT SWIFT SENTENCES, CONAN TELLS THE WIZARD OF THE RECENT FATEFUL NIGHT IN TARANTIA...

FOR A LONG WHILE, PELIAS BROODS, CHIN IN HAND. THEN...
A DEMON OF THE DARKEST REALMS BEYOND THE MOUNTAINS OF THE NIGHT HAS STOLEN YOUR MATE, KING CONAN.
I KNOW HOW TO SUMMON ONE...
...BUT I THOUGHT I SHARED THAT KNOWLEDGE WITH NO ONE ELSE IN THE WEST.

THEN FETCH THIS FIEND YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT-- AND WE'LL WRING THE TRUTH OUT OF HIM, DEVIL OR NO!
NOT SO FAST, MY HOT-HEADED FRIEND!
DO NOT RUSH HEAD-LONG INTO UNKNOWN DANGERS.

IT IS CLEAR THIS DEMON HAS BEEN SUMMONED BY A SORCERER WITH POWERS SUPERIOR TO THOSE OF ORDINARY MAGICIANS.
SHOULD WE DRAG THE FIEND HITHER, WE SHOULD HAVE BOTH HIM AND HIS MASTER TO COPE WITH...

AND THAT MIGHT BE TOO MUCH EVEN FOR US.

NO... I KNOW A BETTER WAY.

THE MIRROR OF LAZBEKRI SHALL GIVE US THE ANSWER!

DESPITE THE WIZARD'S CRYPTIC GESTURES AND THE BILLOWING BLUE SMOKE, IT SEEMS AS IF NOTHING HAPPENS FOR AN AGE... AN ETERNITY...
THE SORCERER'S DEFENSES ARE STRONG, CONAN; I CANNOT PIERCE THEM.
THAT WOULD BE CROM, THE GRIM GOD OF THE CIMMERIANS... THOUGH I'VE HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH GODS FOR MANY YEARS.
WHO IS YOUR TUTELARY DEITY?
I LEAVE THEM ALONE... AND THEY LEAVE ME ALONE.
WELL, PRAY TO YOUR CROM FOR HELP.
WE NEED IT.
CONAN CLOSES HIS EYES AND, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN DECADES... HE PRAYS.
O FATHER CROM, WHO BREATHES POWER TO STRIVE AND SLAY INTO A MAN'S SOUL AT BIRTH... HELP YOUR SON AGAINST THE DEMON THAT HAS STOLEN HIS MATE...!
AND IN HIS BRAIN, HE SEEMS TO HEAR... A VOICE...
...A VOICE WHICH SAYS: "LONG HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME, O CONAN... BUT YOU ARE MY TRUE SON FOR ALL THAT, IN YOUR STRIVING AND ENDURING AND CONQUERING, BEHOLD!"
AND, OPENING HIS EYES, CONAN NOTICES FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT THE NEARBY MIRROR SHOWS NO REFLECTION, EITHER OF PELIAS OR OF ANYTHING ELSE.
IN A LOW MONOTONE, THE OLD WIZARD CHANTS AN INCANTATION...
OMBOS SUTEKH NUBT... URT-HIKEU KAMEPHIS... KHEPRI HARMAKHIS... OMBOS SUTEKH NUBT...
...AND THE CIMMERIAN RECOGNIZES THE TONGUE AS THE LANGUAGE USED BY THE PRIESTS OF STYGIA IN THEIR CLANDESTINE RITUALS IN DARK-WALLED KHEM!

THEN, SLOWLY, AN IMAGE FORMS IN THE GREY MIRROR.
AT FIRST, IT IS BLURRED... UNCERTAIN...
THEN, WITH ABRUPT SWIFTNESS, IT CLEARS, SHARPENS -- INTO A COWLED AND ROBED FIGURE, SEATED AT A LOW TABLE, A SCROLL IN HIS HANDS.
NEXT INSTANT, THE FIGURE THROWS UP ITS HEAD TO LOOK FULL IN THEIR FACES --
--AND THIN, COLORLESS LIPS PART IN A GHASTLY GRIN!
PELIAS -- WHAT THE DEVIL --?
BUT THE KOTHIAN WIZARD DOES NOT RESPOND...
...AS, FROM THE FOLDS OF HIS ROBE, THE GOLD-SKINNED ONE BRINGS FORTH A SHINING, GLIMMERING BALL.
HIS OBLIQUE EYES GAZING COLDLY INTO THEIRS, HE RAISES HIS HAND TO THROW IT --

CONAN EXPLODES INTO LIGHTNING ACTION--
AND, A MOMENT LATER, THE REFLECTING SURFACE OF THE MIRROR IS SHATTERED INTO THOUSANDS OF TINKLING SPLINTERS!
BY ISHTAR, CONAN -- YOU SAVED US BOTH!
THAT SHINING GLOBE WAS AS DEADLY AS A NEST OF COBRAS.
HAD HE MANAGED TO HURL IT INTO THIS CHAMBER, WHILE I WAS TOO SPELLBOUND TO PREVENT HIM--!
THE DEVIL WITH THAT! WHO WAS THAT MAN, WHO LOOKED TO BE FROM KHITAI?
AND WHAT HAS HE TO DO WITH MY QUEST?
MY FRIEND, THESE MATTERS ARE DEEPER THAN I THOUGHT.
THE FATE OF ALL THE WORLD MAY REST UPON YOUR BROAD SHOULDERS.
I KNOW NOTHING ABOUT ANY OF THAT, PELIAS.
I JUST WANT ZENOBIA BACK!
THE SORCERER MERELY DRONES ON, AS IF HE HAS NOT HEARD.
THE MAGICIANS OF THE WEST HAVE LONG BEEN AWARE THAT THE EFFECTS OF CERTAIN SPELLS WE CAST HAVE BEEN WEAKENED... NULLIFIED.
IT IS A CONDITION THAT HAS BEEN GROWING WORSE IN RECENT YEARS.
FOR MONTHS, I HAVE SOUGHT THE CAUSE OF THIS UNIQUE PHENOMENON...

...AND AT LAST, I FEAR I HAVE FOUND IT, MAY THE GODS HAVE MERCY ON MY SOUL!
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT, WIZARD--AND WHAT HAS THIS TO DO WITH ME AND MY KIDNAPED WIFE?
YOU ARE KING IN AQUILONIA, MY FRIEND--THAT PROUD NATION WHICH STANDS AS A BULWARK AMONG THE WESTERN NATIONS.
I'M KING, YES...BUT IF I'M SLAIN ON MY QUEST, AQUILONIA WILL HAVE A NEW KING...
...AND MY NAME WILL BE FORGOTTEN.
THE ONE IN THE MIRROR HAS FATHOMED THAT YOU ARE THE KEY TO HIS CONQUEST OF THE HYBORIAN LANDS.
AYE? YOU ARE MAD, PELIAS!

NAY, CIMMERIAN! YOU HAVE LONG BEEN THE CENTER OF MIGHTY HAPPENINGS--AND THE GODS LOOK FAVORABLY UPON YOU.
BY REJUVENATING AQUILONIA, YOU HAVE FRAYED THE FAR-FLUNG WEB OF INTRIGUE AND EVIL SPUN BY THE SORCEROUS FORCES OF THE DISTANT EAST.
THAT'S WHY HE CONJURED UP A DEMON TO CAPTURE YOUR QUEEN.
HE? YOU MEAN--?
THE ONE IN THE MIRROR, YES!
HE IS CERTAIN YOU WILL BE SLAIN BY FOES ALONG THE WAY, AS YOU RIDE TO RESCUE HER.

I CANNOT TALK YOU INTO GOING BACK HOME TO TARANTIA, I SUPPOSE...AND LETTING OTHERS SEEK YOUR MATE FOR YOU?
GO TO THE DEVIL, PELIAS!
THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT YOU'D SAY...AND SO, HERE!

MANY MOONS HAVE PASSED SINCE I WON THIS RING, FROM A POWERFUL SORCERER OF LUXUR.
THROUGH EONS OF BLACK TIME I STROVE WITH HIM--BUT THOSE WERE THE DAYS WHEN I WAS YOUNG, AND GLORIED IN MY POWERS!
NOW, MY FRIEND, I WANT YOU TO WEAR THIS RING ON YOUR JOURNEY--
THE RING OF RAKHAMON!

YOU HAVE HEARD OF RAKHAMON, OF COURSE?
WHO HAS NOT HEARD OF THAT DREAD SORCERER, THOUGH HE PERISHED A CENTURY AND A HALF AGO?
HE FASHIONED THIS RING, IT'S SAID, OF A FALLEN STAR HE FOUND IN THE FROZEN NORTH.
AYE. THAT'S IT. PUT IT ON.
I FEEL-- SO--
STRANGE? AND WELL YOU SHOULD!
IT'S SAID RAKHAMON NEEDED THE RING TO CONTROL SOME OF THE MORE UNYIELDING DEMONS HE SUMMONED FORTH...
WE SOON SHALL SEE!
PELIAS! WHAT THE DEVIL--?
BEFORE THE RING CAN SERVE YOU, CONAN, YOU FIRST MUST PROVE WORTHY OF IT.
ALREADY THE RING DRAWS YOU TO A PLACE WHICH IS NOT A PLACE...SO THAT YOUR TESTING MAY BEGIN...!
THERE IS NO ANSWER, AS CONAN FINDS HIMSELF STANDING WHERE THERE IS NEITHER EARTH BELOW, NOR SKY ABOVE...
PELIAS! CURSE YOU, WIZARD--
HOW MAY I USE THE RING? HOW??
...BUT ONLY IMMATERIAL, HOWLING SPIRITS...
...AND THEN, STRIDING FROM THE DARKNESS, THERE IS SUDDENLY--
--SOMETHING ELSE!
CROM PRESERVE ME!
EVEN AS THE CLAWED THING GRASPS HIS THROAT--
--HE SUDDENLY REALIZES HE IS GARBED NO LONGER AS AQUILONIA'S KING--
--BUT AS THE WANDERER THAT ONCE HE WAS--

--THE WARRIOR CALLED CONAN THE CIMMERIAN!
AND WITH THAT REALIZATION COMES A STIR-RING TO LIFE--
--AN END TO THE HORROR-STRUCK PARALY-SIS WHICH HAD GRIPPED HIM IN THIS NETHER DOMAIN.
THE THING HE FACES IS MUTE-- AND CONAN WONDERS, ALMOST, IF THERE CAN BE SOUND IN SUCH A PLACE...
THEN, AS HE HEARS BONES GRIND AND CRACK BENEATH INHUMAN FLESH, HE KNOWS THAT IT CAN!
AND HE KNOWS... MORE.
HAH! IF YOUR BONES CAN BREAK, MONSTER--
--YOU CAN BE SLAIN, IF I'M STRONG ENOUGH-- AND FAST ENOUGH!
THE BARBARIAN KNOWS HIS ONLY CHANCE IS TO GET BEHIND THE HELLISH CREATURE--
--TO KEEP OUT OF REACH OF THOSE FLAILING ARMS, THOSE CLACKING PINCERS!
BUT, THE THING'S NECK AND SPINE ARE THICKER AND STRONGER BY FAR THAN EVEN THE NECK OF THE SACRIFICIAL BULL WHICH CONAN SLEW ON HIS DAY OF MANHOOD, SO MANY YEARS AGO...
NOR IS THE DEMON CONTENT TO RELY UPON SHEER STRENGTH ALONE.
MITRA!
THE FLAMES BELOW ARE BLUE-WHITE WITH HEAT--BEYOND ANY THAT HE HAS EVER KNOWN--

YET, THOUGH HE FEELS HIS SKIN BLISTERING, BURNING-- SMELLS HIS OWN FLESH COOKING, SPLITTING IN THE MADDENING HEAT--
--CONAN FIGHTS ON.
IF I MUST DIE-- IN THIS HELLISH PLACE--
--THEN LET IT BE IN BATTLE!
AND, FLINGING BACK HIS HEAD, HE GIVES ONCE MORE THE CIMMERIAN WAR-CRY HE VOICED DAYS AGO IN THE ROYAL PALACE IN TARANTIA--
--A SHOUT THAT SEEMS TO ECHO DOWN THE DARK CORRIDORS OF TIME ITSELF--
--THEN CASCADES BACK UPON HIM, AS IF IT HAS HURLED ITSELF AGAINST THE FARTHEST BOUNDARIES OF THE UNIVERSE--
--AND NOT BEEN FOUND WANTING.
I AM ALIVE, THEN-- AND WHOLE?
IT SEEMS YOU HAVE PASSED THE RING'S OWN TEST, MY FRIEND.
THAT IS GOOD, FOR THE FOE YOU SEEK IS A GREATER SORCERER THAN ANY OF US IN THE WEST.
ONLY WITH THE RING'S AID CAN YOU HOPE TO PREVAIL, OR EVEN SURVIVE...
...WHEN YOU FACE YAH CHIENG, WHO DWELLS IN PAIKING IN FAR-OFF KHITAI.
YAH CHIENG? THAT, THEN IS THE NAME OF THE SORCERER WHO HAS TAKEN ZENOBIA?
AYE.
THEN, BEFORE I DEPART FOR THE EAST TOMORROW, I'LL SACRIFICE A BULLOCK TO CROM.
SAY NOTHING OF IT, LEST PEOPLE THINK CONAN GROWS RELIGIOUS IN HIS OLD AGE.
WITH THE DAWN, I RIDE FOR KHITAI.
I'LL NOT REST TILL MY WOMAN-- MY QUEEN-- IS RESTORED TO ME--
--AND YAH CHIENG LIES DEAD AT MY FEET!
NEXT: THE ROAD TO KHITAI!

AN ERNIE CHAN *CONAN* PORTFOLIO

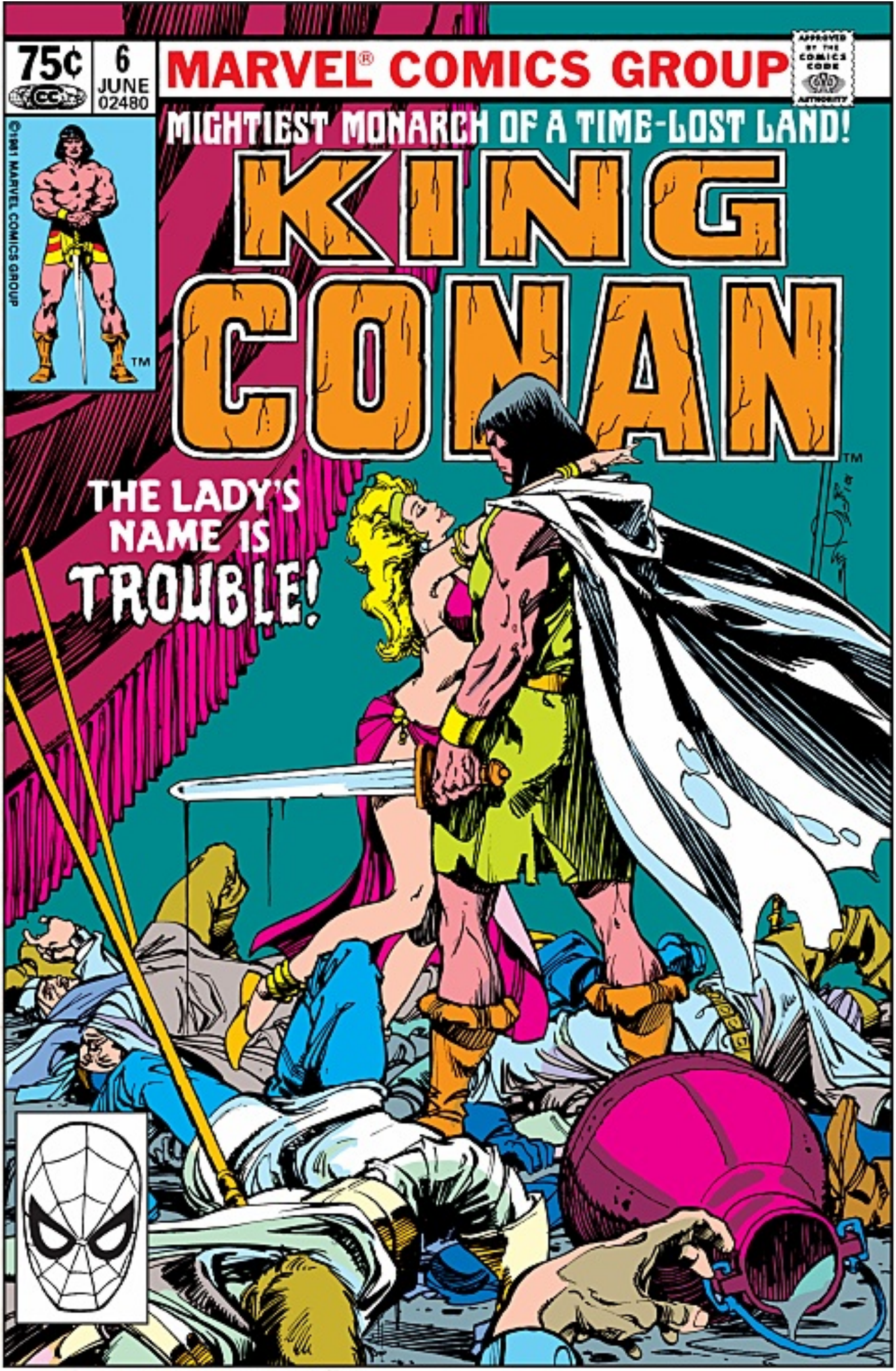
If any one artist's name is almost as closely identified with Conan's comic mag adventures as that of Big John Buscema, it's the monniker ERNIE CHAN. Ernie, whose embellishing has graced many a Conan epic in our various magazines, is an accomplished pencil artist as well — as can be seen most recently in his just-completed heroic stint on the Conan newspaper strip. For this peerless portfolio, Ernie has combined his talents to render some unforgettable Conaniana.

A FINNY DOOM EXPLODES UPON A STARTLED BARBARIAN AND HIS WOMAN!

WITH FULL MOONS COME WEREWOLVES —AND DANGER FOR THE CIMMERIAN!
ERNIE CHAN

"...AND ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST!"
ERNIE CHAN

CONAN AND RED SONJA --
--PARTNERS IN PERIL IN A WORLD
ALL TOO FRAUGHT WITH DEATH!

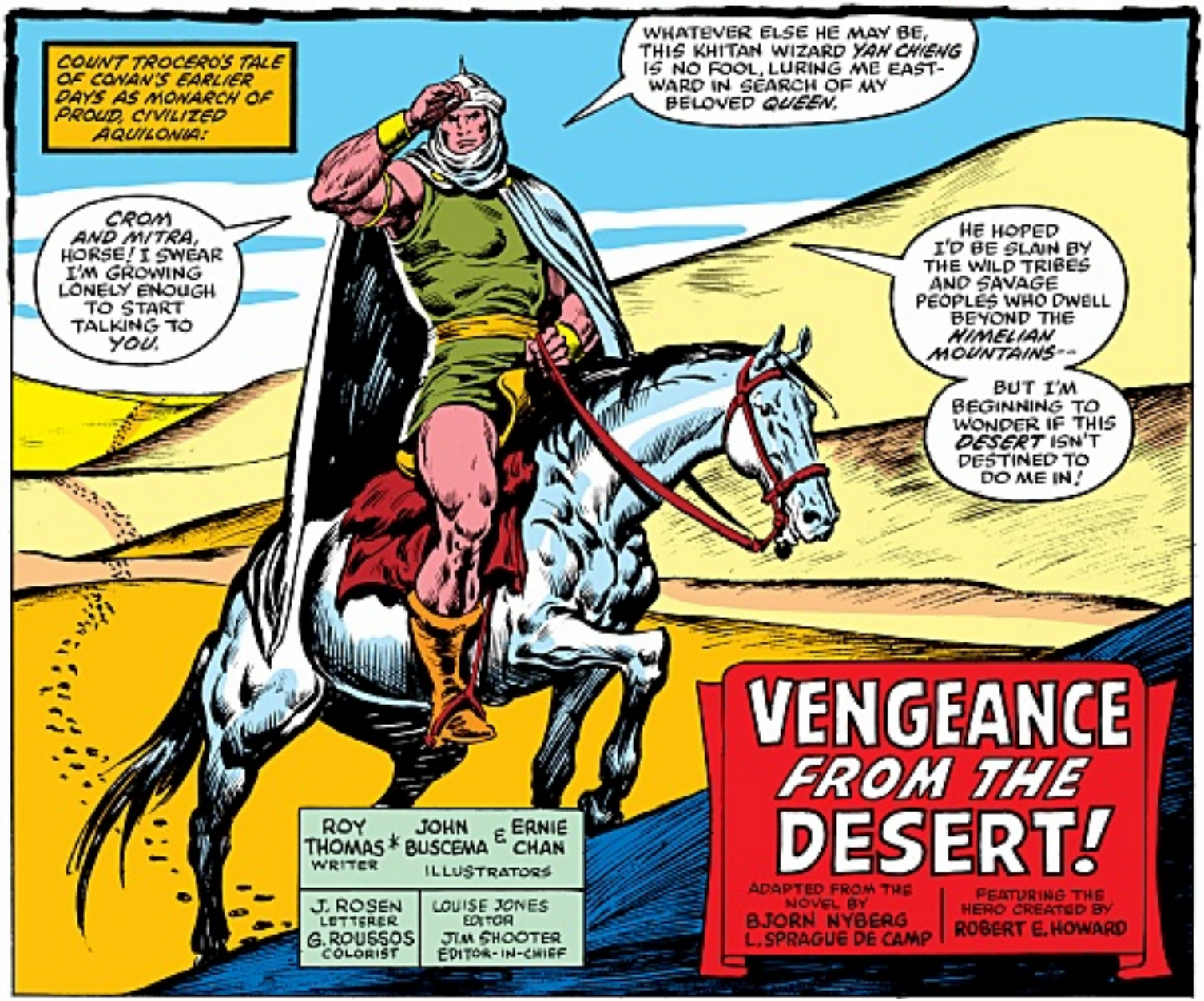


COVER PENCILER & INKER: WALTER SIMONSON

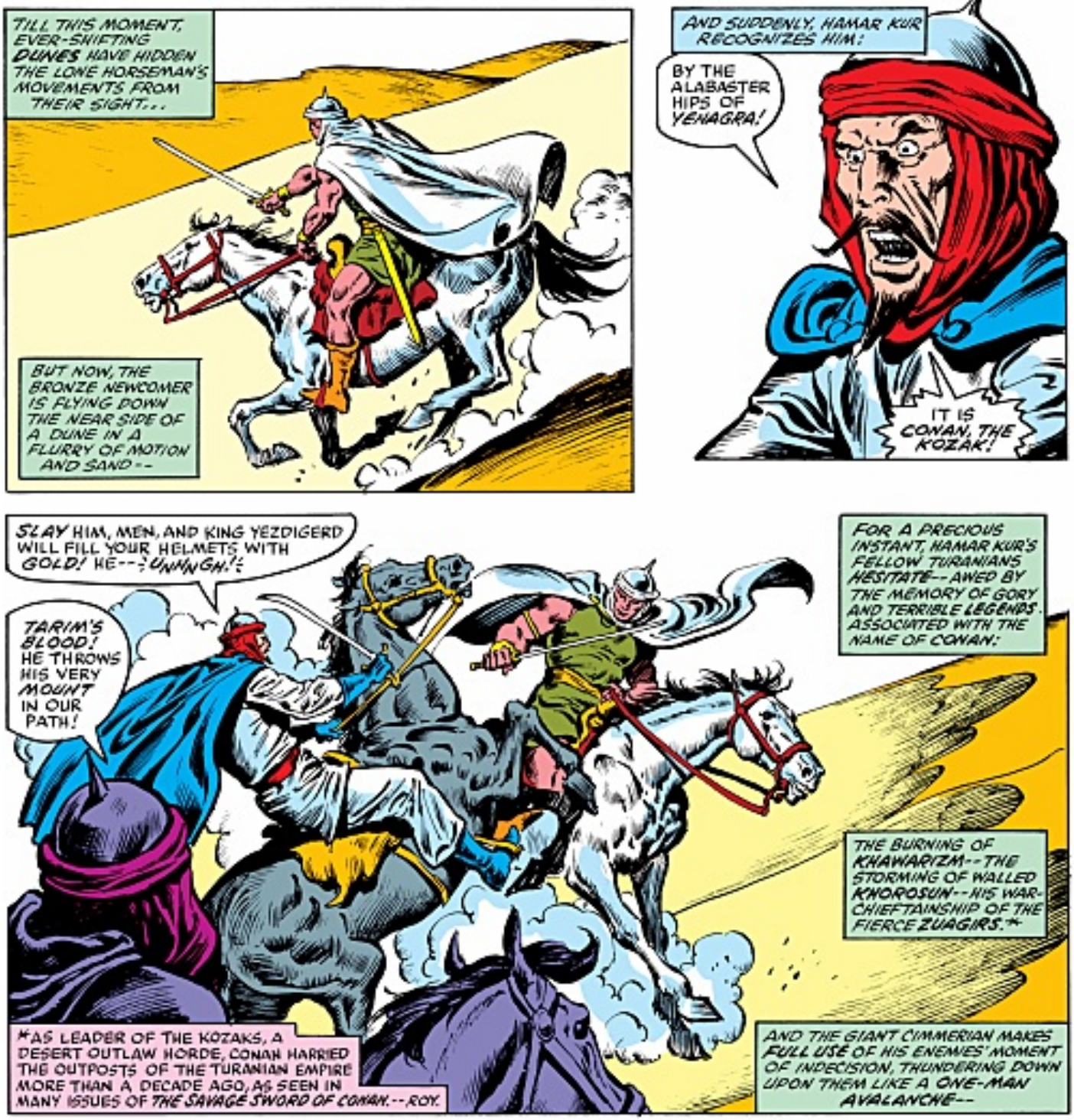
Stan Lee PRESENTS:

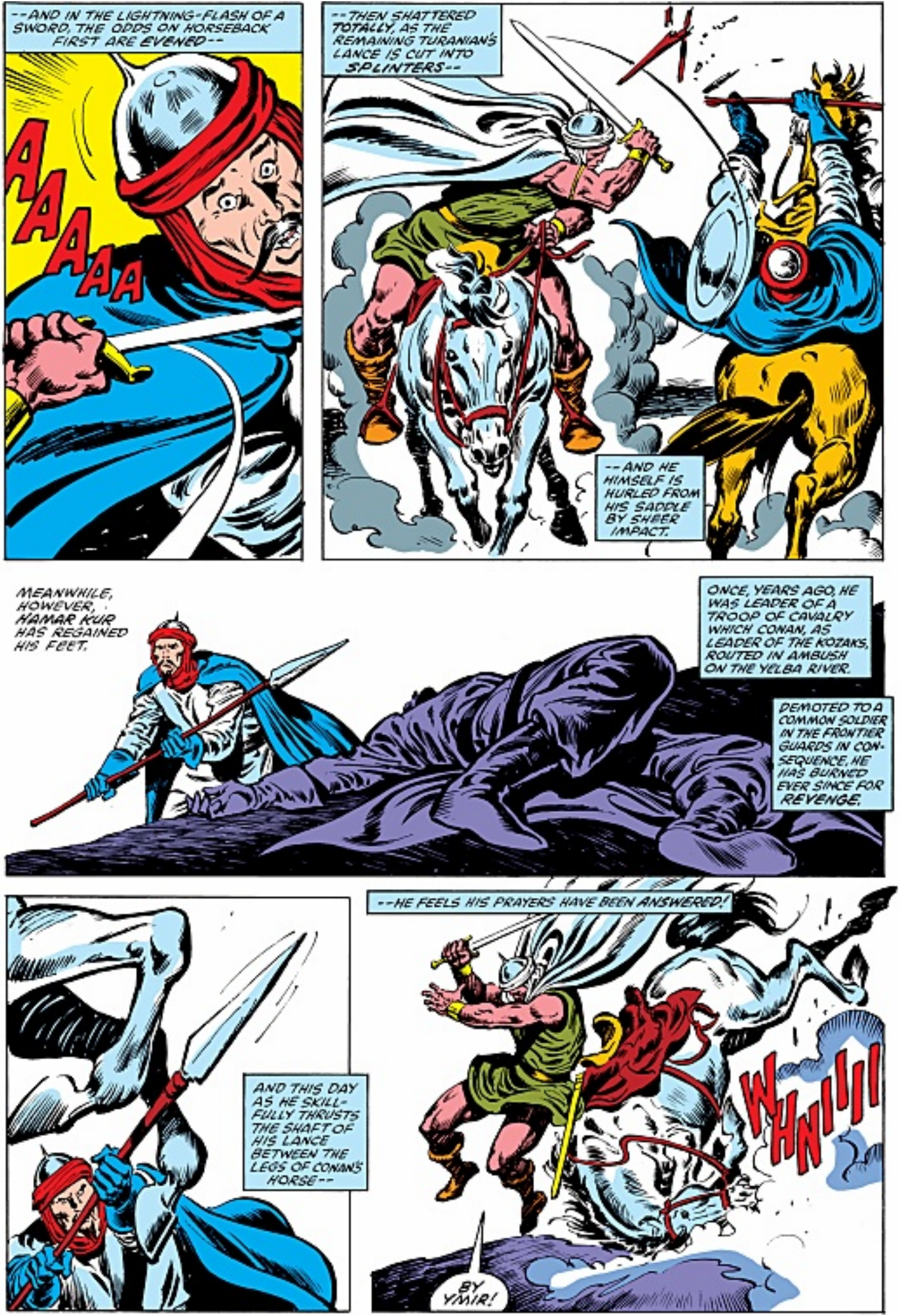
KING CONAN

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD



AHEAD, THE SUN GLINTS ON SPIRED HELMETS AND WHETTED SPEARHEADS.
HERE IN THE WIDE DESERT THAT FORMS THE SOUTHWESTERN MARCHES OF KING YEZDIGERD'S EMPIRE, THAT CAN MEAN BUT ONE THING:
TURANIANS!
THE CAPTIVE ZUAGIR DOG IS LAGGING, HAMAR KUR!
AYE! PERHAPS WE SHOULD LEAVE HIM HERE TO ROT.
NO, DOG-BROTHERS. YOU KNOW OUR COMMANDER WANTS TO MAKE AN EXAMPLE OF ANY ZUAGIRS WE CAPTURE...
AND THERE'S ANOTHER ONE, I'LL WAGER, ATOP THAT FAR DUNE!
ALL THIS CHASING ABOUT! IF ONLY WE'D NOT BEEN SEPARATED FROM THE REST OF OUR TROOP BY THAT SANDSTORM...!
WE'LL SIMPLY LOOK THE MORE COURAGEOUS WHEN WE REACH FORT WAKLA, FOOL.
NO NEED TO TELL OUR GREAT LEADER WE DIDN'T SLAY A DOZEN MORE LIKE HIM -- AND ONLY CAUGHT THIS ONE BECAUSE HIS HORSE STUMBLED UNDER HIM.
WE'LL LEAVE THE DOG HERE A WHILE... AND BRING HIM COMPANIONSHIP OF HIS OWN KIND.
BY ERLIK, WE'LL TEACH THOSE ZUAGIRS TO HARRY TURAN'S CARAVANS, AS IF THIS WERE THE OLD DAYS!


TILL THIS MOMENT, EVER-SHIFTING DUNES HAVE HIDDEN THE LONE HORSEMAN'S MOVEMENTS FROM THEIR SIGHT...
BUT NOW, THE BRONZE NEWCOMER IS FLYING DOWN THE NEAR SIDE OF A DUNE IN A FLURRY OF MOTION AND SAND--
AND SUDDENLY, HAMAR KUR RECOGNIZES HIM:
BY THE ALABASTER HIPS OF YEHAGRA!
IT IS CONAN, THE KOZAK!
SLAY HIM, MEN, AND KING YEZDIGERD WILL FILL YOUR HELMETS WITH GOLD! HE--? UNNNGH.!:
TARIM'S BLOOD! HE THROWS HIS VERY MOUNT IN OUR PATH!
FOR A PRECIOUS INSTANT, HAMAR KUR'S FELLOW TURANIANS HESITATE--AWED BY THE MEMORY OF GORY AND TERRIBLE LEGENDS ASSOCIATED WITH THE NAME OF CONAN:
THE BURNING OF KHAWARIZM--THE STORMING OF WALLED KHOROSUN--HIS WAR-CHIEFTAINSHIP OF THE FIERCE ZUAGIRS.*
AS LEADER OF THE KOZAKS, A DESERT OUTLAW HORDE, CONAN HARRIED THE OUTPOSTS OF THE TURANIAN EMPIRE MORE THAN A DECADE AGO, AS SEEN IN MANY ISSUES OF THE SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN.--ROY.
AND THE GIANT CIMMERIAN MAKES FULL USE OF HIS ENEMIES' MOMENT OF INDECISION, THUNDERING DOWN UPON THEM LIKE A ONE-MAN AVALANCHE--
--TO THE DETRIMENT FIRST OF HAMAR KUR HIMSELF!
UNNGH!
KILL HIM! KILL HIM!
NOW, AT LAST, THE OTHER TWO SOLDIERS COUCH THEIR LANCES AND SPUR FURIOUSLY--BUT A SPLIT SECOND TOO LATE.
WITH THE FURY OF A SUDDEN THUNDERSTORM, CONAN IS UPON THEM--


--AND IN THE LIGHTNING-FLASH OF A SWORD, THE ODDS ON HORSEBACK FIRST ARE EVENED--
AAAAA
--THEN SHATTERED TOTALLY, AS THE REMAINING TURANIAN'S LANCE IS CUT INTO SPLINTERS--
--AND HE HIMSELF IS HURLED FROM HIS SADDLE BY SHEER IMPACT.
MEANWHILE, HOWEVER, HAMAR KUR HAS REGAINED HIS FEET.
ONCE, YEARS AGO, HE WAS LEADER OF A TROOP OF CAVALRY WHICH CONAN, AS LEADER OF THE KOZAKS, ROUTED IN AMBUSH ON THE YELBA RIVER.
DEMOTED TO A COMMON SOLDIER IN THE FRONTIER GUARDS IN CONSEQUENCE, HE HAS BURNED EVER SINCE FOR REVENGE.
AND THIS DAY AS HE SKILLFULLY THRUSTS THE SHAFT OF HIS LANCE BETWEEN THE LEGS OF CONAN'S HORSE--
--HE FEELS HIS PRAYERS HAVE BEEN ANSWERED!
WHNIIII
BY YMIR!

WITH THE PRACTICED EASE OF THE HARDENED MERCENARY, HOWEVER, THE BARBARIAN KING HAS THROWN HIMSELF CLEAR-- TO RISE, SWORD STILL IN HAND--
--EVEN AS, WITH COLD BLUE EYES SLITTED, HE WATCHES HIS TWO SURVIVING FOEMEN SLINK TOWARD HIM, ONE FROM EITHER SIDE.
AGAINST SUCH TACTICS, THERE IS NO GOOD DEFENSE--
--AND SO, CONAN DOES NOT DEFEND-- BUT ATTACKS!
URRGKK
THE FIRST TURANIAN IS BREATHING HIS LAST BEFORE HE KNOWS WHAT HAPPENED--
NOR IS THE CIMMERIAN UNAWARE THAT HAMAR KUR WILL BE AIMING A SCIMITAR AT HIS BACK--
--A BLOW HE SCARCELY MANAGES TO CATCH UPON HIS OWN STRAIGHT SWORD.
A MOMENT LATER, THE CORUSCATING DANCE OF DOOM IS ENDED--
YYYYYY
--THOUGH CONAN WOULD NOT HAVE THOUGHT HAMAR KUR TO HAVE SUCH A HIGH-PITCHED DEATH-SHRIEK IN HIM.

THEN, EVEN AS HE FINISHES WIPING HIS SWORD ON HIS ENEMY'S SASH--
PRAISE BE TO KEMOSH, WHO HAS ANSWERED MY PRAYERS!--
WHO THE DEVIL--?
I AM YAR ALLAL OF THE DUALI TRIBE--
--AND I REJOICE THAT YOU HAVE RETURNED TO US, HAWK OF THE DESERT--
--AND HAVE SENT THESE DOGS TO THE FLOORS OF HELL!; PTUI!
DO I KNOW YOU, FELLOW?
KNOW ME?
WHY, I WAS ONE OF THOSE YOU LED TO PLUNDER, SO MANY YEARS AGO.
A DESERT-FOX WOULD SOONER FORGET ITS HOLE, THAN A ZUAGIR WOULD FORGET YOU, WHO WERE OUR GREAT WAR-CHIEF!
THERE WILL BE FEASTING AND DANCING IN THE VILLAGES, WHEN THEY KNOW YOU HAVE RETURNED, O HAWK!
TELL ME, THEN-- WHAT'S AFOOT IN THE DESERT?
HOW DID YOU FALL INTO THE HANDS OF THE ACCURSED HYRKANIANS?
ALAS, I WAS RIDING IN HASTE AND ALONE WHEN THESE DOGS CAUGHT ME.
THEY WERE BRINGING ME BACK TO FORT WAKLA FOR QUESTIONING-- AND DEATH.
WHY YOUR HURRY? AND WHY WERE YOU RIDING ALONE, WHEN THESE HILLS SWARM WITH TURANIAN PATROLS?
A TERRIBLE MISFORTUNE HAS STRUCK THE DUALI TRIBE, MY LORD.
SATE YOUR THIRST-- AND EAT, WHILE YOU TELL ME OF IT, YAR ALLAL.
FOR DAYS, WE LAY IN WAIT IN THE RUINS OF THE GHARAT TEMPLE, FIFTY LEAGUES SOUTH OF HERE... THAT WE MIGHT CAPTURE THE LADY THANARA AND HER WEALTH, IN AN EAST-BOUND CARAVAN.
WHO'S THIS THANARA? I DON'T--
YOU HAVE BEEN AWAY LONG, O HAWK...

SHE IS A COURTESAN OF MAYPUR, FAMED FOR HER BEAUTY AND RICHES--AND FURTHERMORE, HIGH IN THE FAVOR OF TURAN'S KING YEZDIGERD.
COULD WE BUT CAPTURE HER, A FABULOUS RANSOM WOULD BE OURS--AS WELL AS THE SPOILS FROM THE CAMEL TRAIN.
SO YOU LAY IN AMBUSH FOR HER?
AYE, AND ONE DAY HER CARAVAN CAME INTO VIEW, OR SO IT SEEMED.
WE EXPECTED AN EASY CONQUEST OF THE MERCHANTS AND THEIR RETAINERS...
BUT SUDDENLY, THE CARAVANERS THREW ASIDE THEIR KHALATS--AND MAILED LANCERS IN THE WHITE TURBANS OF THE IMPERIAL GUARD RUSHED AGAINST US--A HUNDRED STRONG!
A TRAP, THEN?
AYE! EVEN YIN ALLAL, MY FATHER, WAS TAKEN CAPTIVE--THOUGH MANY A TURANIAN FELL BENEATH DUALI SPEAR OR CURVED SWORD, AS WELL!
YIN ALLAL, YES--I REMEMBER HIM WELL, AS ONE OF MY STAUNCHEST SUPPORTERS WHEN I LED THE THREE UNITED ZUAGIR TRIBES!
IS YOUR FATHER ALIVE, THEN, SO FAR AS YOU KNOW?
AYE! BUT BY NOW, THE CARAVAN IS SAFELY WITHIN THE WALLS OF FORT WAKLA.
WE MUST RESCUE HIM, THEN.
O HAWK--YOU WOULD--?
AM I AN HYRKANIAN DOG, TO LEAVE AN OLD FRIEND UNAIDED IN THE HANDS OF HIS FOES?
CATCH YOURSELF A HORSE, YAR ALLAL--
--AND LEAD ME TO THE DUALI OASIS!
AND IF MY NAME IS NOT FORGOTTEN THERE--
--WE'LL PULL THE TURANIANS' BEARDS YET, BY CROM!

NIGHT: AND THE OASIS OF THE DUALI CAMP LIES ENFOLDED IN EBONY, STAR-SPRINKLED ARMS...
...AS RIDERS FROM THE NEIGHBORING KHAROVA AND QIRLATA TRIBES ARRIVE, HASTILY SUMMONED BY DUALI MESSENGERS WHO BROUGHT THE NEWS:

"A LEGEND HAS RETURNED!"
IT IS GOOD THAT THE THREE TRIBES CAN SET ASIDE THEIR SMALLER QUARRELS, MY FRIENDS.
FORT WAKLA CANNOT BE TAKEN BY A DIRECT ASSAULT, OR BY SIEGE-- SO WE MUST USE TRICKERY!
WE YIELD TO THE WISDOM OF CONAN, GREATEST WAR-CHIEF OF THE ZUAGIR, IN THIS OR ANY AGE.

GOOD! HERE, THEN, IS MY PLAN: FIFTY OF US, GARBED AS MERCHANTS, SLAVES, RETAINERS, AND CAMEL DRIVERS, SHALL TAKE A CARAVAN TO THE FORT, AS IF WE WERE ON THE ROAD TO KHERDPUR.
AT THE TWELFTH HOUR, WE SHALL CUT DOWN THE GUARDS AT THE GATE-- OPEN THEM, AN LET IN THE HORDE.

OUR MAIN GOALS ARE THE BARRACKS, THE OFFICERS' QUARTERS, AND THE GOVERNOR'S PALACE.
WE SHALL PILLAGE, BURN, SACK, AND SLAY-- UNTIL THE STREETS RUN RED WITH TURANIAN BLOOD!

NOW, TO WORK, DOG-BROTHERS!
BEFORE SUNRISE, I WANT SUCH A CAMEL TRAIN AS WOULD MAKE ANY ZUAGIR'S MOUTH WATER!
IT SHALL BE DONE, O DESERT HAWK!
THE AMBUSH AT THE GHARAT TEMPLE MUST BE AVENGED!

Some days Later:
HAIL, THE FORT!
WE WOULD BEG ENTRANCE TO FORT WAKLA, STRONGHOLD OF THE NOBLE TURANIANS!

STAND FORTH AND IDENTIFY YOURSELVES, WAYFARERS!
LORD, I AM ZEBAH, A SHEMITE OF ANAKIA; I HAVE COME UP FROM YUKKUB TO BARTER MY GOODS IN KHERDPUR.
AND WHO IS THIS HUGE ONE BEHIND YOU, HIS FACE ALL HIDDEN?

LORD, HE IS MY PERSONAL SERVANT AND BODYGUARD--A STYGIAN, UNDER A VOW OF SILENCE.

BY ASHTORETH, IT WILL BE GOOD TO BE SAFELY WITHIN WALLS AGAIN, DESPITE ALL MY HIRED GUARDS.
YOUR PRECAUTIONS WERE WASTED, SHEMITE! JUST NOW, A WOMAN COULD RIDE UNMOLESTED ALONG THE CARAVAN TRAIL.
ONLY DAYS AGO, THE IMPERIAL GUARDS SMASHED A HOST OF DESERT NOMADS... EVEN CAPTURED THEIR CHIEFTAIN.
THAT IS INDEED GLORIOUS NEWS.

AYE! VEZIR SHAH HAS ORDERED US TO SLAY ANY ZUAGIR CAUGHT BY OUR PATROLS.
BY THE TIME YOU RETURN FROM YUKKUB, THE DESERT WILL BE SAFER STILL.
I WILL BURN AN OFFERING TO BEL AS A MEASURE OF MY GRATITUDE.

WITHIN THE FORT, THE NEWCOMERS FIND A SMALL CITY LAID OUT BEFORE THEM...
AND THEY MAKE FOR QUARTERS BY THE WESTERN WALL, RESERVED FOR VISITING CARAVANS.

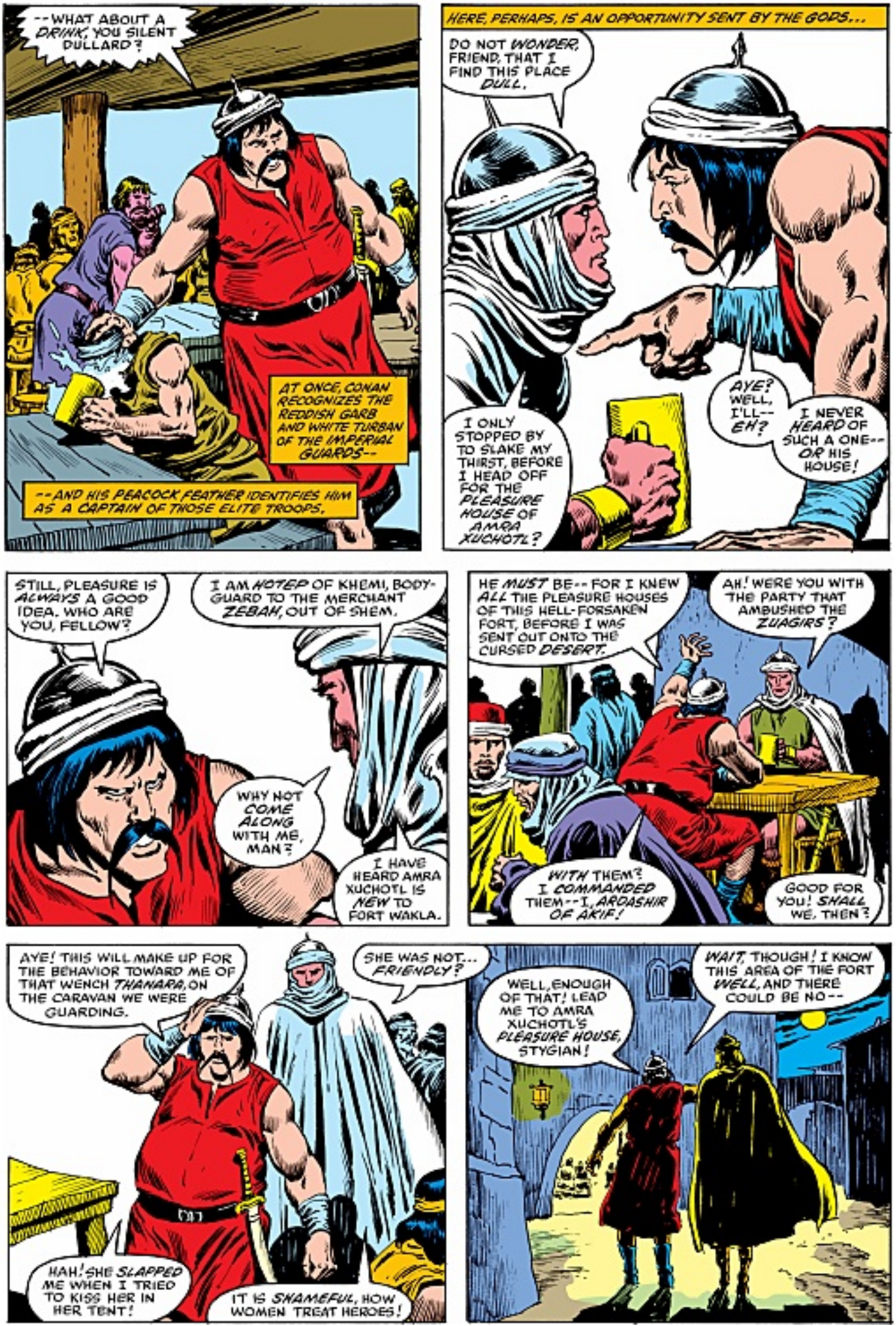
THERE, WITH TWO HOURS YET TO GO BEFORE THE APPOINTED TIME, AN ARGUMENT RAGES...
...BUT, CONAN, SHOULD WE NOT ALL STAY HERE, UNSUSPECTED, UNTIL THE HOUR ARRIVES?
BY MITRA'S MANTLE, WE WILL DO AS I HAVE SAID!
WE HAVE LOCATED THE QUARTERS OF THE OFFICERS AND COMMON SOLDIERS... BUT WE KNOW NOT HOW MANY TROOPS ARE QUARTERED THERE.

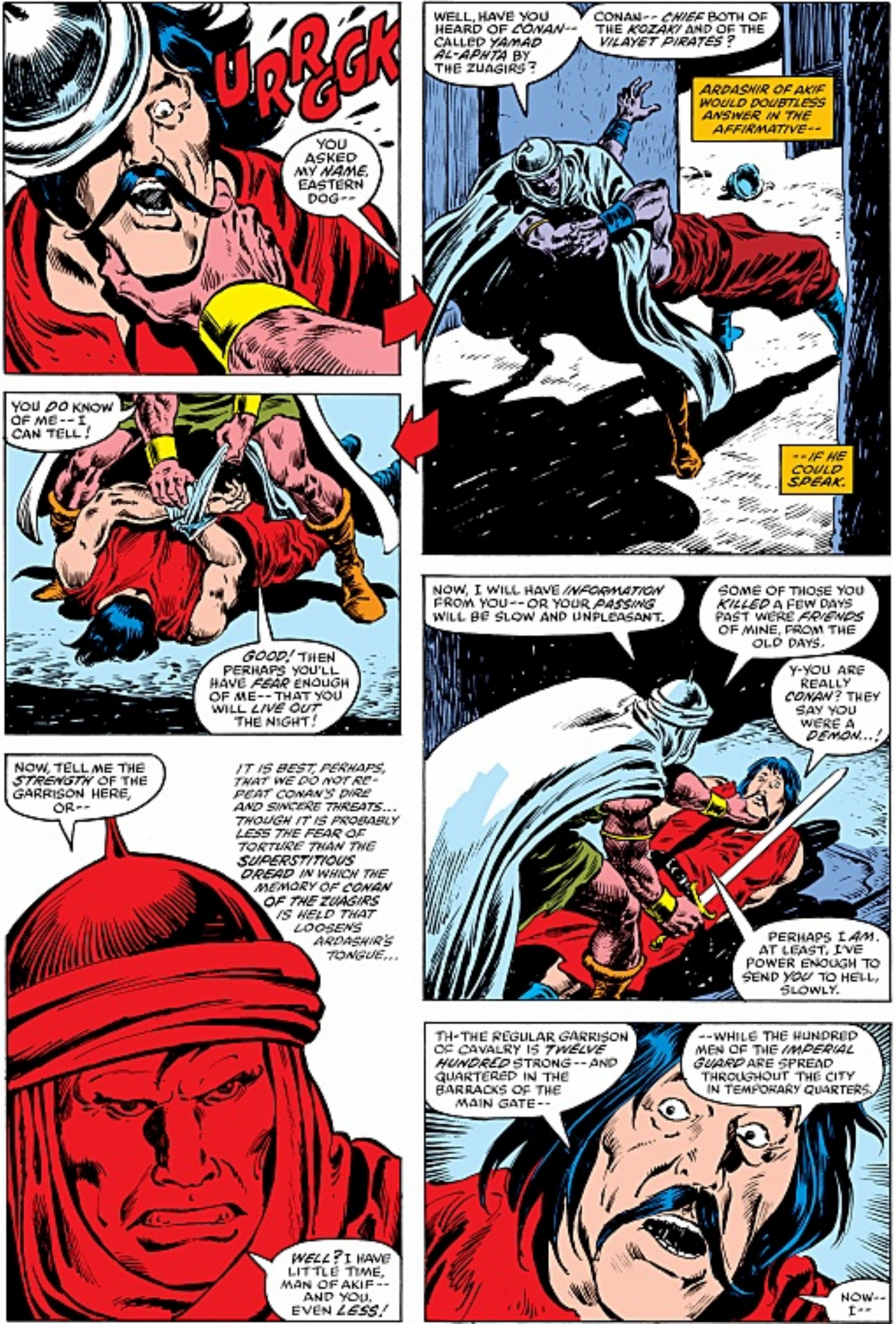
IN THE TAVERN DISTRICT, THERE WILL BE SCORES OF DRUNKEN SOLDIERS OFF DUTY.
FROM ONE OF THEM, I SHALL GET THE INFORMATION I WANT--IF I MUST WRING IT FROM HIM LIKE A SODDEN CLOTH!
THEN, DO AS YOU WILL, O HAWK.

HIS IRON DETERMINATION PREVAILING, CONAN STRIDES OFF, HIS FACE STILL HIDDEN.
NO USE UPSETTING THEIR CAREFULLY-LAID PLANS BY LETTING SOME TURANIAN WITH A LONG MEMORY RECOGNIZE HIM...!

THE FUMES OF SOUR WINE, STALE BEER, AND SWEAT STRIKE THE CIMMERIAN IN THE FACE AS HE ENTERS THE FIRST DRINKING SHOP...
...AND HE REMEMBERS HOW HE OFTEN REVELED IN SUCH PLACES IN THE DAYS BEFORE HE HAD A KINGSHIP...
...AND A WIFE, NOW CAPTIVE OF AN EASTERN FIEND!

SEEKING OUT A SECLUDED TABLE, HE NURSES A TANKARD OF BEER FOR A TIME, AND BEGINS TO RELAX.
NERVOUSNESS SELDOM ASSAILS HIM, BUT HIS SENSES HAVE BEEN ON EDGE SINCE HE ENTERED THE ENEMY'S LAIR...
HEY, YOU!--


--WHAT ABOUT A DRINK, YOU SILENT DULLARD?
AT ONCE, CONAN RECOGNIZES THE REDDISH GARB AND WHITE TURBAN OF THE IMPERIAL GUARDS--
--AND HIS PEACOCK FEATHER IDENTIFIES HIM AS A CAPTAIN OF THOSE ELITE TROOPS.
HERE, PERHAPS, IS AN OPPORTUNITY SENT BY THE GODS...
DO NOT WONDER, FRIEND, THAT I FIND THIS PLACE DULL.
I ONLY STOPPED BY TO SLAKE MY THIRST, BEFORE I HEAD OFF FOR THE PLEASURE HOUSE OF AMRA XUCHOTL?
AYE? WELL, I'LL-- EH?
I NEVER HEARD OF SUCH A ONE-- OR HIS HOUSE!
STILL, PLEASURE IS ALWAYS A GOOD IDEA. WHO ARE YOU, FELLOW?
I AM HOTEP OF KHEMI, BODY-GUARD TO THE MERCHANT ZEBAH, OUT OF SHEM.
WHY NOT COME ALONG WITH ME, MAN?
I HAVE HEARD AMRA XUCHOTL IS NEW TO FORT WAKLA.
HE MUST BE-- FOR I KNEW ALL THE PLEASURE HOUSES OF THIS HELL-FORSAKEN FORT, BEFORE I WAS SENT OUT ONTO THE CURSED DESERT.
AH! WERE YOU WITH THE PARTY THAT AMBUSHED THE ZUAGIRS?
WITH THEM? I COMMANDED THEM--I, ARDASHIR OF AKIF!
GOOD FOR YOU! SHALL WE, THEN?
AYE! THIS WILL MAKE UP FOR THE BEHAVIOR TOWARD ME OF THAT WENCH THANARA, ON THE CARAVAN WE WERE GUARDING.
SHE WAS NOT... FRIENDLY?
HAH! SHE SLAPPED ME WHEN I TRIED TO KISS HER IN HER TENT!
IT IS SHAMEFUL, HOW WOMEN TREAT HEROES!
WELL, ENOUGH OF THAT! LEAD ME TO AMRA XUCHOTL'S PLEASURE HOUSE, STYGIAN!
WAIT, THOUGH! I KNOW THIS AREA OF THE FORT WELL, AND THERE COULD BE NO--

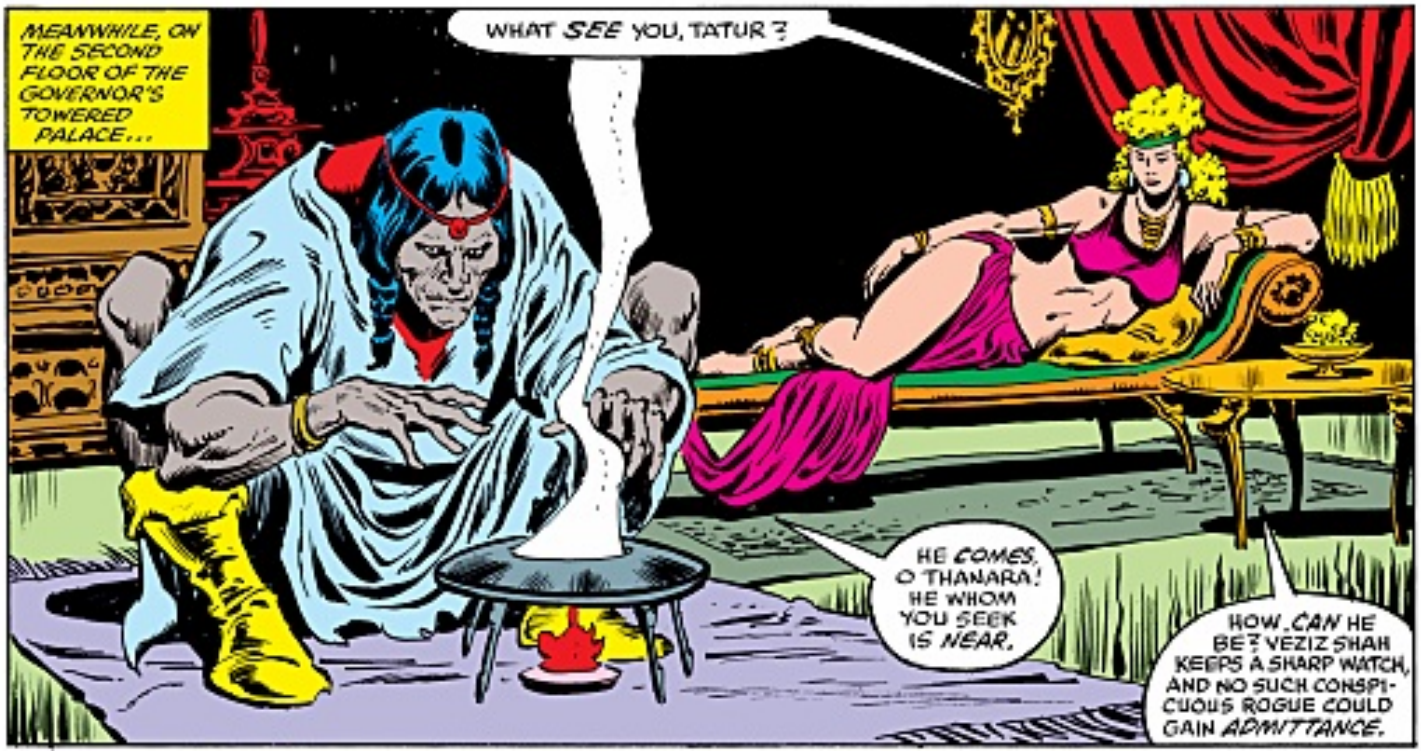

URRGGK
YOU ASKED MY NAME, EASTERN DOG--
WELL, HAVE YOU HEARD OF CONAN-- CALLED YAMAD AL-APHTA BY THE ZUAGIRS?
CONAN-- CHIEF BOTH OF THE KOZAKI AND OF THE VILAYET PIRATES?
ARDASHIR OF AKIF WOULD DOUBTLESS ANSWER IN THE AFFIRMATIVE--
--IF HE COULD SPEAK.
YOU DO KNOW OF ME-- I CAN TELL!
GOOD! THEN PERHAPS YOU'LL HAVE FEAR ENOUGH OF ME-- THAT YOU WILL LIVE OUT THE NIGHT!
NOW, I WILL HAVE INFORMATION FROM YOU-- OR YOUR PASSING WILL BE SLOW AND UNPLEASANT.
SOME OF THOSE YOU KILLED A FEW DAYS PAST WERE FRIENDS OF MINE, FROM THE OLD DAYS.
Y-YOU ARE REALLY CONAN? THEY SAY YOU WERE A DEMON...!
PERHAPS I AM. AT LEAST, I'VE POWER ENOUGH TO SEND YOU TO HELL, SLOWLY.
NOW, TELL ME THE STRENGTH OF THE GARRISON HERE, OR--
IT IS BEST, PERHAPS, THAT WE DO NOT REPEAT CONAN'S DIRE AND SINCERE THREATS... THOUGH IT IS PROBABLY LESS THE FEAR OF TORTURE THAN THE SUPERSTITIOUS DREAD IN WHICH THE MEMORY OF CONAN OF THE ZUAGIRS IS HELD THAT LOOSENS ARDASHIR'S TONGUE...
WELL? I HAVE LITTLE TIME, MAN OF AKIF-- AND YOU, EVEN LESS!
TH-THE REGULAR GARRISON OF CAVALRY IS TWELVE HUNDRED STRONG-- AND QUARTERED IN THE BARRACKS OF THE MAIN GATE--
--WHILE THE HUNDRED MEN OF THE IMPERIAL GUARD ARE SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE CITY IN TEMPORARY QUARTERS.
NOW-- I--

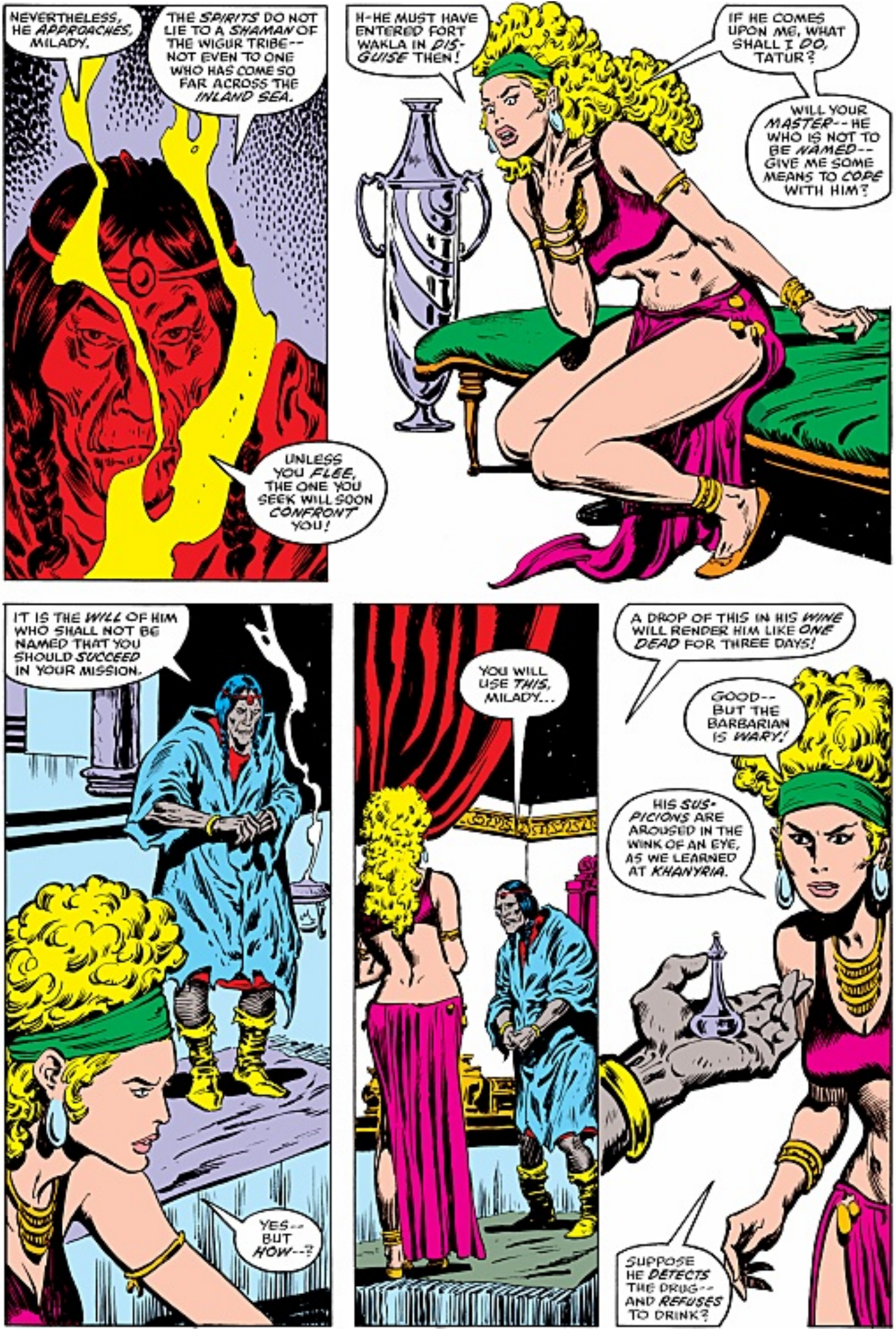
TELL ME WHERE YOU CHAINED THE DESERT CHIEFTAIN YOU CAPTURED--AND WHERE THE LADY THANARA IS QUARTERED! HURRY!
B-BOTH ARE IN THE GOVERNOR'S TOWER--THE DESERT MAN IN THE DUNGEON BENEATH IT!
AND WHAT IS THE STRENGTH OF THE GUARDS AT THE GATE?
I DO NOT KNOW--I SWEAR IT!
NOW--KILL ME IF YOU MUST--I KNOW NO MORE!

I MUST BE GROWING SOFT!
TIME WAS, I'D HAVE CUT YOUR THROAT AFTER QUESTIONING YOU.

BUT, NO NEED OF THAT, ARDASHIR OF AKIF--

--THE ZUAGIRS WILL NO DOUBT TAKE CARE OF THAT WHEN THEY FIND YOU!
A GLANCE AT THE MOON TELLS CONAN THE TWELFTH HOUR IS NEAR, AS HE STRIDES OFF, FULL OF THE KNOWLEDGE HE HAS SOUGHT.


MEANWHILE, ON THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE GOVERNOR'S TOWERED PALACE...
WHAT SEE YOU, TATUR?
HE COMES, O THANARA! HE WHOM YOU SEEK IS NEAR.
HOW CAN HE BE? VEZIZ SHAH KEEPS A SHARP WATCH, AND NO SUCH CONSPICUOUS ROGUE COULD GAIN ADMITTANCE.


NEVERTHELESS, HE APPROACHES, MILADY.
THE SPIRITS DO NOT LIE TO A SHAMAN OF THE WIGUR TRIBE-- NOT EVEN TO ONE WHO HAS COME SO FAR ACROSS THE INLAND SEA.
UNLESS YOU FLEE, THE ONE YOU SEEK WILL SOON CONFRONT YOU!
H-HE MUST HAVE ENTERED FORT WAKLA IN DISGUISE THEN!
IF HE COMES UPON ME, WHAT SHALL I DO, TATUR?
WILL YOUR MASTER-- HE WHO IS NOT TO BE NAMED-- GIVE ME SOME MEANS TO COPE WITH HIM?
IT IS THE WILL OF HIM WHO SHALL NOT BE NAMED THAT YOU SHOULD SUCCEED IN YOUR MISSION.
YES-- BUT HOW--?
YOU WILL USE THIS, MILADY...
A DROP OF THIS IN HIS WINE WILL RENDER HIM LIKE ONE DEAD FOR THREE DAYS!
GOOD-- BUT THE BARBARIAN IS WARY!
HIS SUSPICIONS ARE AROUSED IN THE WINK OF AN EYE, AS WE LEARNED AT KHANYRIA.
SUPPOSE HE DETECTS THE DRUG-- AND REFUSES TO DRINK?

BE NOT AFRAID, MILADY.
IN THAT CASE, THE CONTENTS OF THIS LEATHER POUCH WILL LAY HIM LOW-- IF HE BUT BREATHE IT.

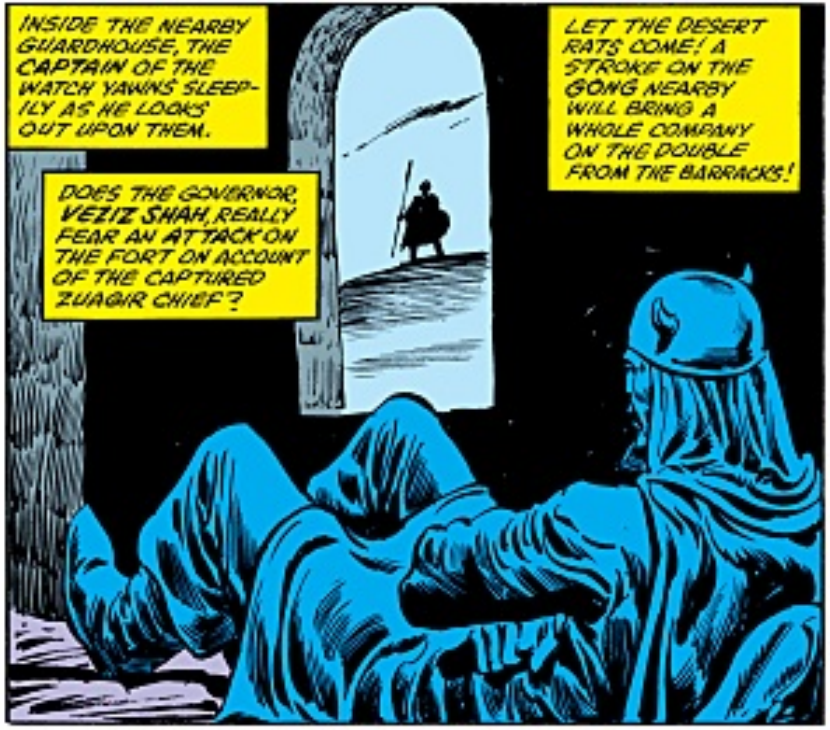
WHAT IS IT, SHAMAN?
POLLEN OF THE YELLOW LOTUS OF KHITAI.
USE IT ONLY AS A LAST RESORT, FOR IT WOULD AFFECT YOU, TOO, IF YOU BREATHE IT...
...AND TOO DEEP A BREATH OF IT CAN KILL.

GOOD, BUT NOT GOOD ENOUGH! I WANT A LAST-MINUTE MEANS OF ESCAPE... AND YOUR MASTER OWES IT TO ME FOR PAST SERVICES.
HE WHO IS NOT TO BE NAMED SAID TRULY YOU ARE A SHARP BARGAINER.
TAKE THIS TRANS-LUCENT EGG, THEN.
BREAK THIS IN YOUR HOUR OF NEED-- AND HELP WILL COME TO YOU FROM OTHER DIMENSIONS.

I AM SATISFIED.
RIDE TO AGHRAPUR AND TELL THE KING I AWAIT CONAN HERE.
IF ALL GOES WELL HE SOON SHALL HAVE HIS ENEMY!

A FEW MINUTES LATER, TATUR THE SHAMAN JOGS OFF INTO THE NIGHT ACROSS THE SANDS AT A TIRELESS CANTER, ASTRIDE A SHAGGY HYRKANIAN PONY...

...WHILE A PAIR OF SPEARMEN PATROL THE PARAPETS ABOVE THE TWIN DOORS OF THE FORT'S MAIN GATE.


INSIDE THE NEARBY GUARDHOUSE, THE CAPTAIN OF THE WATCH YAWNS SLEEPILY AS HE LOOKS OUT UPON THEM.
LET THE DESERT RATS COME! A STROKE ON THE GONG NEARBY WILL BRING A WHOLE COMPANY ON THE DOUBLE FROM THE BARRACKS!
DOES THE GOVERNOR, VEZIR SHAH, REALLY FEAR AN ATTACK ON THE FORT ON ACCOUNT OF THE CAPTURED ZUAGIR CHIEF?

FOR A MOMENT, THE MOON IS OBSCURED BY CLOUDS -- AND AS IT COMES OUT AGAIN, A SHOCKING SIGHT MEETS AKEB MAAN'S STARTLED EYES...
WHAT IN ERLIK'S NAME--?
FOR NOW, INSTEAD OF SPIRED HELMETS AND MANTLES--

--THE MEN ATOP THE WALL WEAR BANDED KAFFIAS AND KHALATS.

ZUAGIRS, BY TARIM!
I'LL SOUND THE ALARM AND SOON--

NOT SOON ENOUGH, HYRKANIAN DOG!
WHAT MANNER OF MAN ARE YOU-- TO SMASH IN DOORS THUS?

YOU'RE NO ZUAGIR, BY THE GODS!
THE TURANIAN'S ASTONISHMENT CAUSES HIM TO PAUSE AN INSTANT--LONG ENOUGH FOR THE MAN BEFORE HIM TO DRAW HIS SWORD--

--AND ATTACK WITH THE SWIFTNESS OF DESERT LIGHTNING!
YOU ASKED ME WHO I WAS, JACKAL...
I AM CONAN--
--AYE, EVEN THE SAME YOU'RE THINKING OF, AS YOUR WIDENED EYES DO SHOW ME--
--AND I THOUGHT IT FITTING THAT A MAN KNOW THE NAME--
AAACK
--OF THE ONE WHO SENDS HIM TO VALHALLA!

CONAN, HOWEVER, WASTES NO TIME IN GLOATING OVER THE UNMOVING CORPSE.
ANY MOMENT NOW, AN INQUISITIVE GUARDSMAN MIGHT POKE HIS HEAD THROUGH A BARRACK'S WINDOW, OR A BELATED CITIZEN MIGHT COME WANDERING BY.

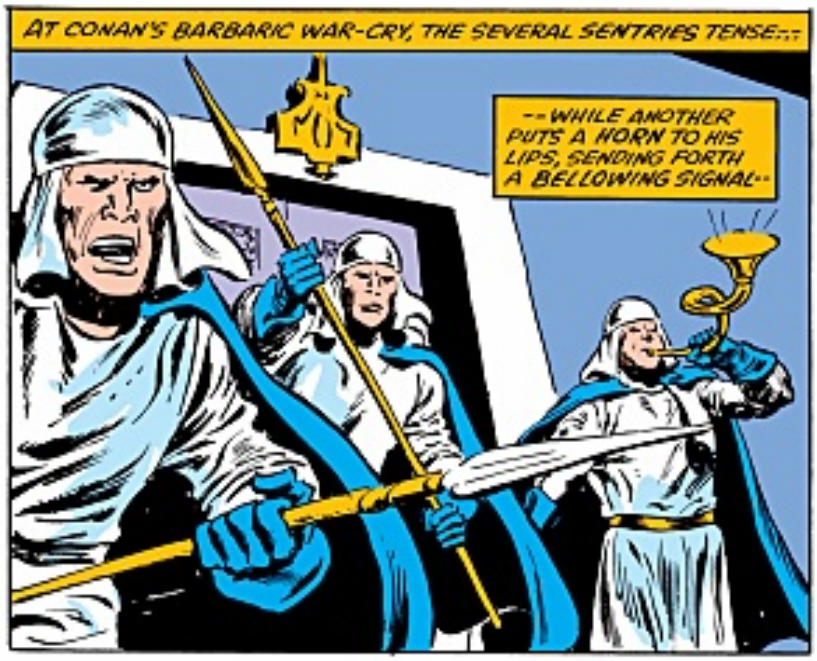
WITHIN SECONDS, THE BIG IRON-SHEATHED DOORS ARE OPENING--
--AND THROUGH THEM POURS A SWIFT AND SILENT-FOOTED STREAM OF WHITE-ROBED NOMADS!

IN SWIFT, LOW-SPOKEN WORDS, CONAN ISSUES HIS ORDERS...
TWO MEN WITH TORCHES-- SET THE BARRACKS AFIRE!
BURN AND SLAY, AND TAKE ANY SPOIL AND CAPTIVES YOU WANT-- BUT KEEP TOGETHER!
THREE HUNDRED ARCHERS-- PLACE YOURSELVES TO MOW DOWN THE SOLDIERS AS THEY POUR OUT!
DO NOT BREAK UP INTO BANDS SMALLER THAN TWENTY.

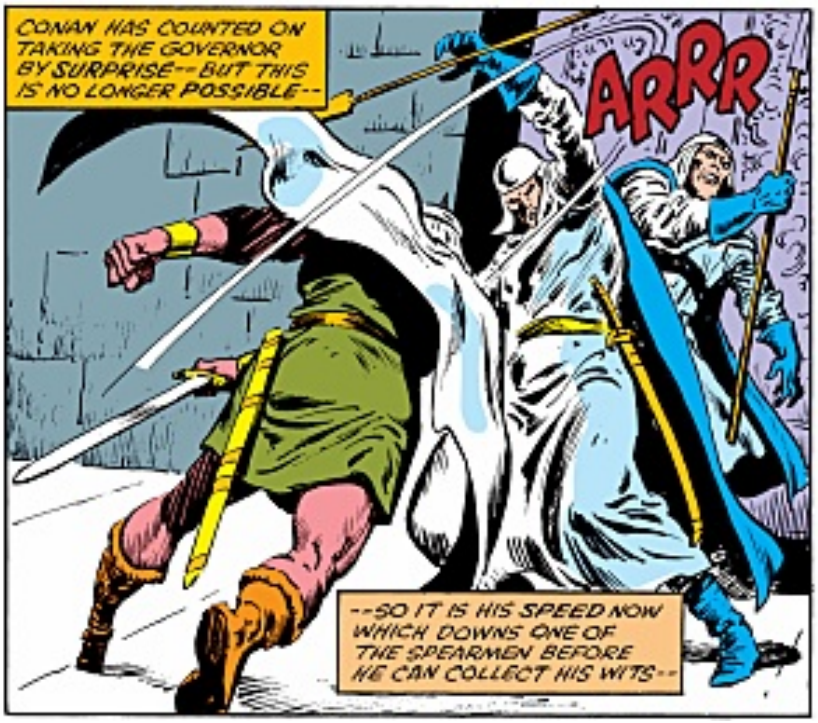
THABIT-- BRING YOUR FIFTY WITH ME.
I AM FOR THE GOVERNOR'S PALACE!

CONAN LEADS HIS MEN STRAIGHT TOWARD THEIR GOAL.
IT IS HIS INTENTION TO SAVE YIN ALLAL FIRST.

AND BESIDES, HE HAS BEEN INTRIGUED BY TALES OF THE BEAUTIFUL COURTESAN CALLED THANARA...
HII-YAAAH!


AT CONAN'S BARBARIC WAR-CRY, THE SEVERAL SENTRIES TENSE...
--WHILE ANOTHER PUTS A HORN TO HIS LIPS, SENDING FORTH A BELLOWING SIGNAL--

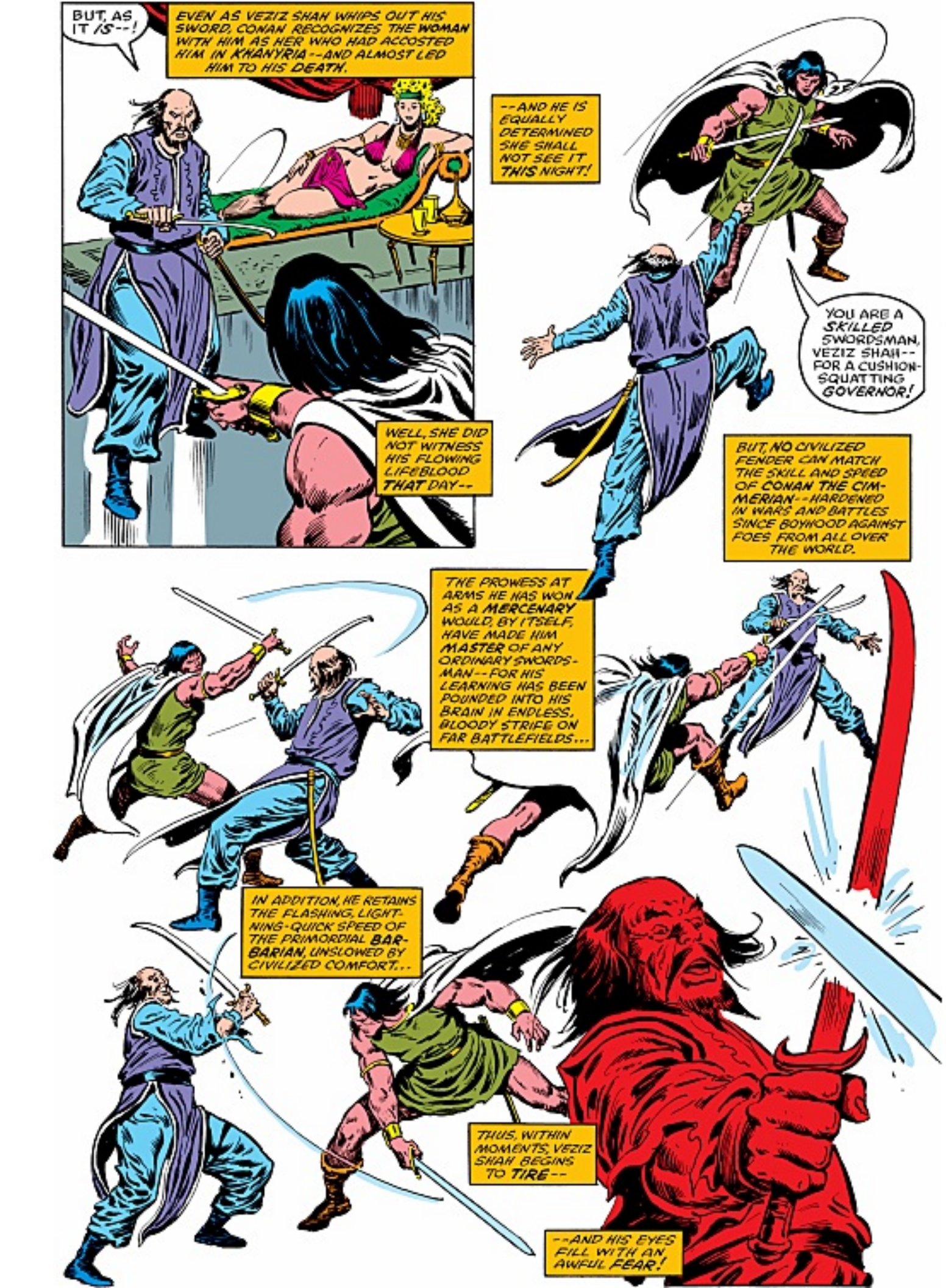
UNNNGH--!
--WHICH IS CUT SHORT BY WELL-AIMED ZUAGIR ARROWS.


CONAN HAS COUNTED ON TAKING THE GOVERNOR BY SURPRISE--BUT THIS IS NO LONGER POSSIBLE--
ARRR
--SO IT IS HIS SPEED NOW WHICH DOWNS ONE OF THE SPEARMEN BEFORE HE CAN COLLECT HIS WITS--

--AND A SECOND MAN'S SWIFTLY-AIMED SWORD STROKE--

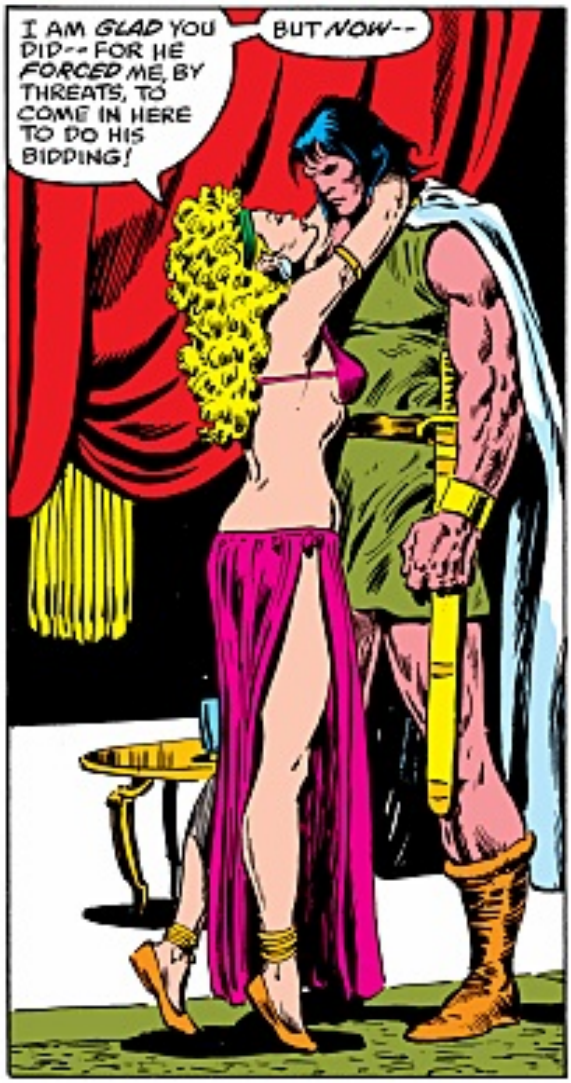
--IS NO MORE EFFECTIVE, EITHER AT SLAYING THE INTRUDER, OR AT PRESERVING HIS OWN LIFE.
GNUNG
ROUSED NOW TO A VICIOUS LUST FOR KILLING, CONAN THRUSTS AGAINST THE COPPER DOOR, WHICH YIELDS BEFORE HIS MASSIVE SHOULDERS...
THIS WAY, BROTHERS!
TEN OF YOU STAY HERE-- THE REST, FOLLOW ME!
ISHTAR'S GIRDLE! MORE WHITE-TURBANS! *
*TURANIAN SLANG FOR THE IMPERIAL GUARDSMEN. --ROY.
DEATH TO THE INTERLOPERS!
THERE'LL BE DEATH DEALT HERE THIS NIGHT, SURELY ENOUGH-- BUT IT'S WE WHO'LL BE THE REAPERS!
MANY A CURVED KNIFE OR SHORTENED SPEAR FINDS ITS MARK IN TURANIAN VITALS...
BUT THE FLASHING SCIMITARS OF THE WORLD-CONQUERING HYRKANIANS ALSO TAKE A HEAVY TOLL.
WITHIN MINUTES, THE BATTLE IS ENDED...
I'M FOR THE SECOND FLOOR!
TEN OF YOU-- SEARCH FOR THE KEYS TO THE DUNGEON, AND FREE YIN ALLAL--

--WHILE I PAY THE GOVERNOR A VISIT!
WE SHALL DO AS YOU SAY, YAMAD AL-APHTA.
IT TAKES LITTLE OF CONAN'S TRACKING INSTINCT TO FIND THE QUARTERS OF VEZIR SHAH.
HE BUT SEEKS OUT THE MOST INTRICATELY-DECORATED DOOR, WHICH IN TURN MUST LEAD INTO THE MOST GRACIOUSLY APPOINTED APARTMENTS--
--AND THAT, OF COURSE, MUST BELONG TO THE LORD OF THIS SPRAWLING PALACE!
AWAKEN IF YOU SLEEP, VEZIR SHAH--
YOUR SINS ARE ABOUT TO CATCH UP WITH YOU!
WHAT? YOU DARE INVADE MY CHAMBERS, YOU RED-HANDED ROGUE!?
I HAD HEARD YOU WERE ON THE ROVE AGAIN, AND I HAD HOPED FOR THE PLEASURE OF HAVING YOUR LIMBS TORN OFF BY WILD HORSES!


BUT, AS IT IS--!
EVEN AS VEZIZ SHAH WHIPS OUT HIS SWORD, CONAN RECOGNIZES THE WOMAN WITH HIM AS HER WHO HAD ACCOSTED HIM IN KHANYRIA--AND ALMOST LED HIM TO HIS DEATH.
WELL, SHE DID NOT WITNESS HIS FLOWING LIFE@BLOOD THAT DAY--
--AND HE IS EQUALLY DETERMINED SHE SHALL NOT SEE IT THIS NIGHT!
YOU ARE A SKILLED SWORDSMAN, VEZIZ SHAH--FOR A CUSHION-SQUATTING GOVERNOR!
BUT, NO CIVILIZED FENDER CAN MATCH THE SKILL AND SPEED OF CONAN THE CIMMERIAN--HARDENED IN WARS AND BATTLES SINCE BOYHOOD AGAINST FOES FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD.
THE PROWESS AT ARMS HE HAS WON AS A MERCENARY WOULD, BY ITSELF, HAVE MADE HIM MASTER OF ANY ORDINARY SWORDSMAN--FOR HIS LEARNING HAS BEEN POUNDED INTO HIS BRAIN IN ENDLESS, BLOODY STRIFE ON FAR BATTLEFIELDS...
IN ADDITION, HE RETAINS THE FLASHING, LIGHTNING-QUICK SPEED OF THE PRIMORDIAL BARBARIAN, UNSLOWED BY CIVILIZED COMFORT...
THUS, WITHIN MOMENTS, VEZIZ SHAH BEGINS TO TIRE--
--AND HIS EYES FILL WITH AN AWFUL FEAR!

THUS IN SUDDEN DESPERATION--
YOUR SWORD-ARM'S STRENGTH IS FAR BETTER THAN YOUR THROWING ABILITY HYRKANIAN!
NEXT INSTANT, THE GOVERNOR IS RACING FOR THE FAR WALL--
--WHERE HIS URGENTLY QUESTING FINGERS PROBE THE SURFACE AS IF SEEKING THE SPRING TO OPEN A HIDDEN EXIT.
WHERE IS IT? WHERE--?
HE IS NOT DESTINED TO FIND IT.
DOG! DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU CAUGHT TEN OF MY AFGHULIS WHEN YOU COMMANDED A SQUADRON IN SECUNDERAM?
AND HOW YOU SENT ME THEIR PICKLED HEADS IN JARS, WITH WISHES FOR A HEARTY REPAST?
=URRGGH--!=
YOUR TIME HAS COME, VEZIZ SHAH!--
GGAAA
EVEN ABOVE THE TURANIAN'S GURGLING SCREAM, CONAN CAN HEAR HIS SPINE SNAP LIKE A DRY TWIG...
AND THEN, A LIFELESS CORPSE FLOPS TO THE FLOOR.

THEN, THE WOMAN ON THE DIVAN RISES...
...AND THE BLOOD RUNS SWIFTLY THROUGH HIS VEINS AT THE SIGHT OF HER.
YOU ARE A REAL MAN!
NONE OTHER COULD HAVE SLAIN VEZIZ SHAH.
AND YOU CARE NOT THAT HE'S DEAD?

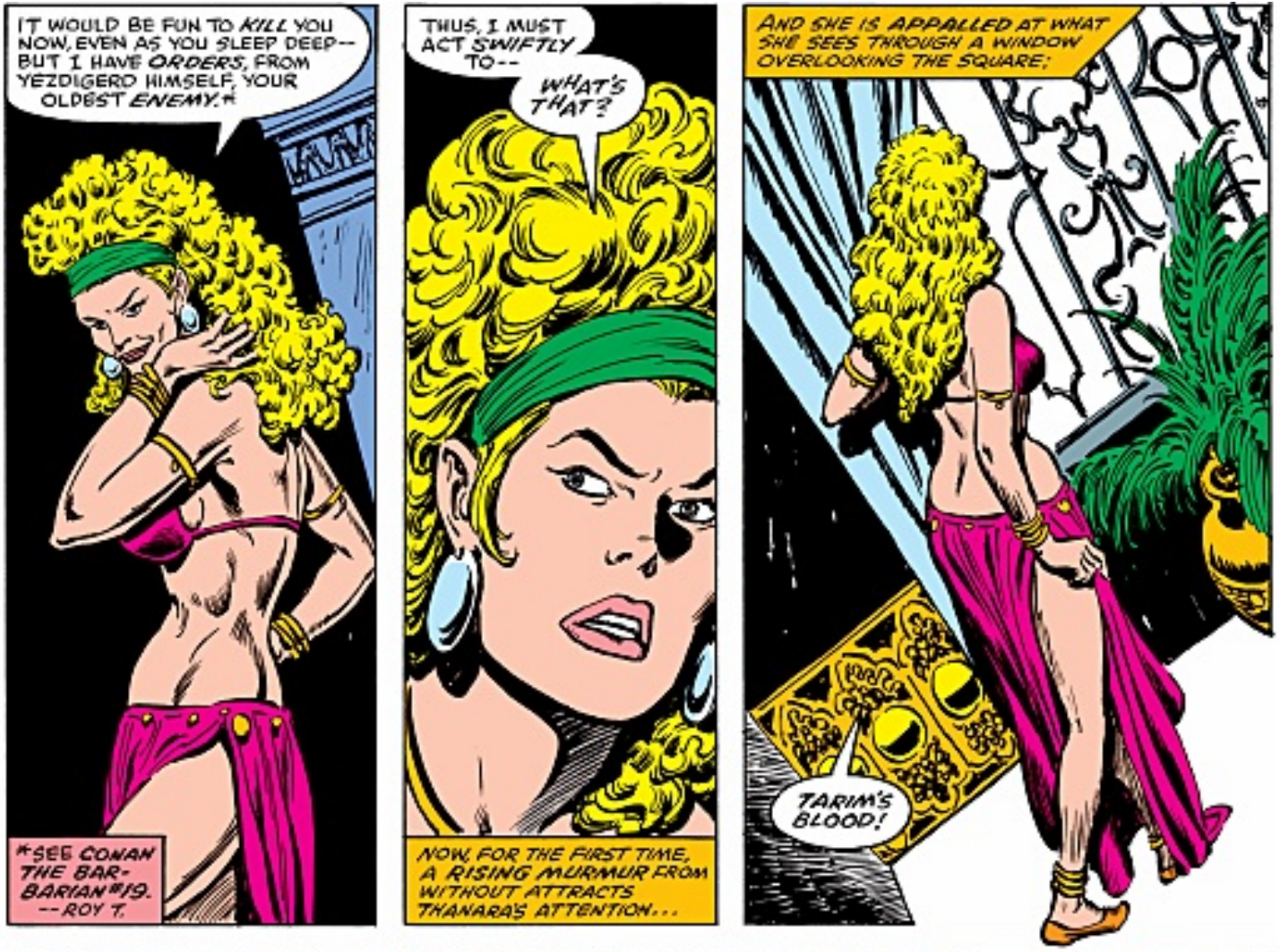

I AM GLAD YOU DID-- FOR HE FORCED ME, BY THREATS, TO COME IN HERE TO DO HIS BIDDING!
BUT NOW--

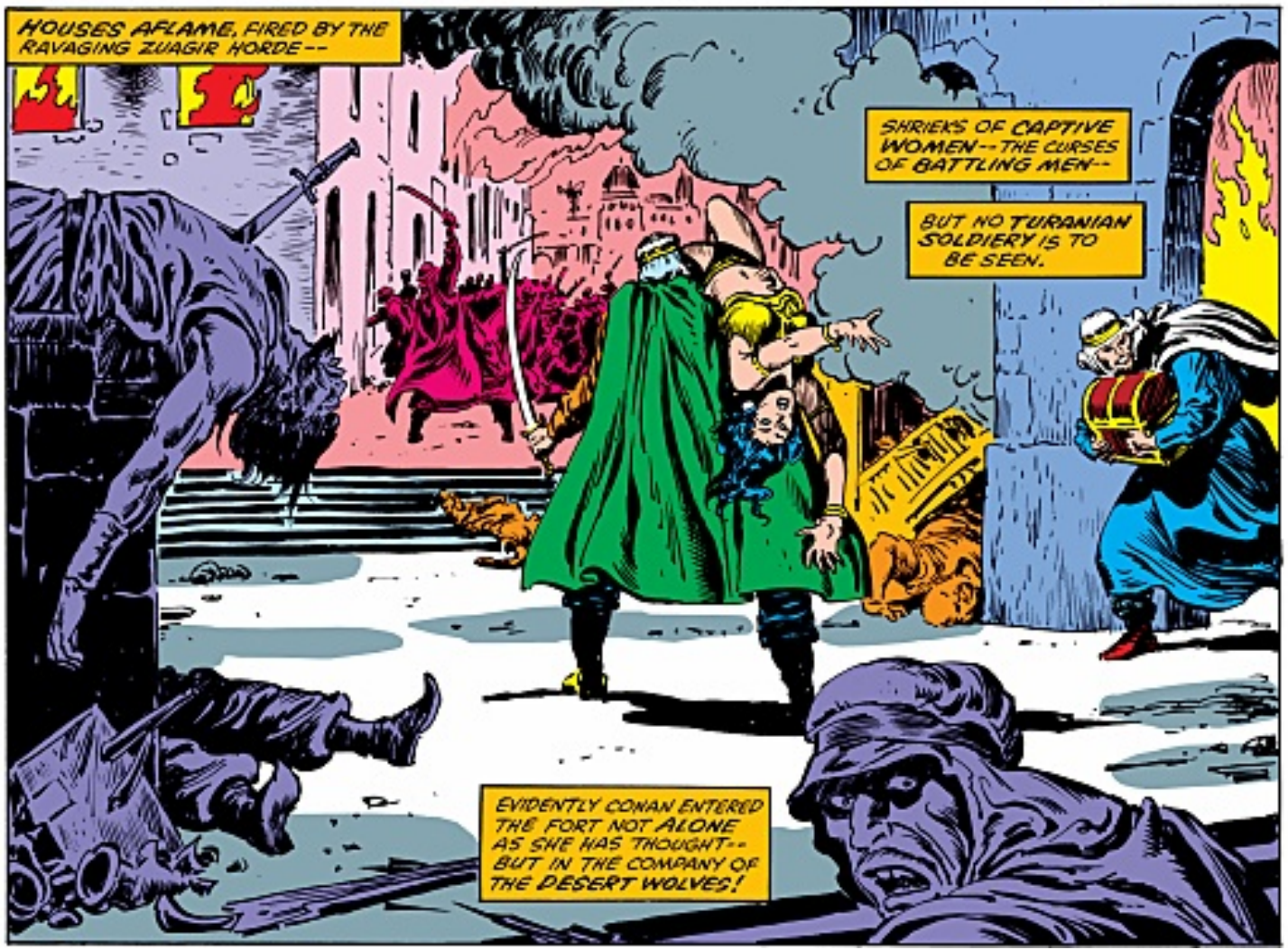
YOU WERE CLAD OTHERWISE WHEN WE MET IN KHANYRIA!*
TELL ME THE TALE BEHIND THAT AMBUSH--AND YOUR PART IN IT!
NO LIES NOW, IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU!
YES... NO LIES...!
*LAST ISSUE. --R.T.

I AM THANARA, A HIGH-BORN LADY OF MAYPUR.
KING YEZDIGERD HAS GRACIOUSLY APPOINTED ME ONE OF HIS PERSONAL AGENTS--THE EYES AND EARS OF THE KING, AS WE CALL--
MUST YOU GO ON HOLDING MY HAND LIKE THAT? I'M NOT ARMED.

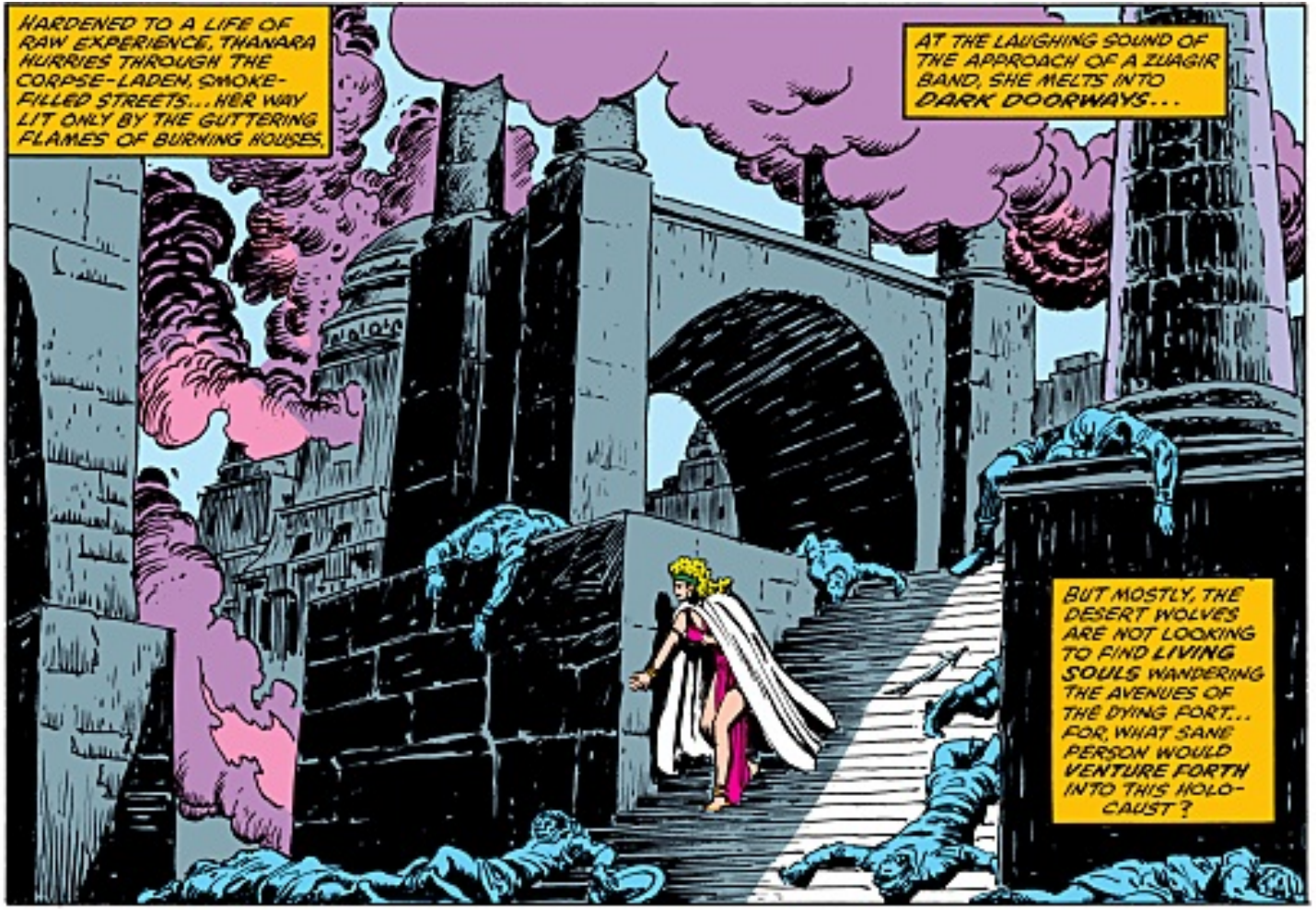
AH, MY THANKS! BUT, MY THROAT IS DRY--AND YOU MUST BE THIRSTY AFTER KILLING.
THIS WINE IS THE BEST FROM VEZIZ SHAH'S OWN CELLAR.
WHILE WE DRINK, I WILL TELL YOU THE STORY YOU DEMAND.

NOW, AS I WAS ABOUT TO SAY-- WHEN WORD CAME THAT YOU HAD EMBARKED ON YOUR LONELY JOURNEY, I WAS SENT TO SUPERVISE THE WORK OF THE STUPID MERCENARIES ENGAGED BY OUR AGENTS IN TARANTIA.
I SUPPOSE THAT--
WHAT IS WRONG, O CONAN?
I WAS BORN A BARBARIAN, WOMAN. WE USE MORE SENSES THAN OUR EYES ONLY.
IT TOOK ONLY THE SLIGHTEST SNIFF TO TELL ME OF THE THREAT THAT LURKS WITHIN THIS CUP.
NO! I SWEAR I--
I'LL SUPERVISE YOU, STRUMPET!
NOW, YOU'LL-- WHAT??
EVEN THE SMALLEST PINCH OF THE POLLEN OF THE YELLOW LOTUS ACTS QUICKLY...
...VERY QUICKLY.
UNNNH
SNORE ON, CONAN OF AQUILONIA!
FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS, YOU WILL BE LIKE A MAN STONE DEAD!


IT WOULD BE FUN TO KILL YOU NOW, EVEN AS YOU SLEEP DEEP-- BUT I HAVE ORDERS, FROM YEZDIGERD HIMSELF, YOUR OLDEST ENEMY.*
*SEE CONAN THE BARBARIAN #19. --ROY T.
THUS, I MUST ACT SWIFTLY TO--
WHAT'S THAT?
NOW, FOR THE FIRST TIME, A RISING MURMUR FROM WITHOUT ATTRACTS THANARA'S ATTENTION...
AND SHE IS APPALLED AT WHAT SHE SEES THROUGH A WINDOW OVERLOOKING THE SQUARE:
TARIM'S BLOOD!


HOUSES AFLAME, FIRED BY THE RAVAGING ZUAGIR HORDE--
SHRIEKS OF CAPTIVE WOMEN--THE CURSES OF BATTLING MEN--
BUT NO TURANIAN SOLDIERY IS TO BE SEEN.
EVIDENTLY CONAN ENTERED THE FORT NOT ALONE AS SHE HAS THOUGHT-- BUT IN THE COMPANY OF THE DESERT WOLVES!

A SEASONED SPY, THANARA COLLECTS HER WITS, WHICH ALREADY ARE HATCHING A PLAN...
...WHICH INCLUDES FINDING THE SPRING ACTIVATING THE LATE GOVERNOR'S SECRET DOOR.
DEFTLY, SHE FINDS IT.
EVEN AS A SECTION OF WALL SWINGS INWARD, DISCLOSING A SPIRAL STAIRCASE BEHIND, SHE STRAINS WITH AN UNCONSCIOUS, WEIGHTY BURDEN...
DAMN YOU-- CONAN OF AQUILONIA!
WHY DO YOU HAVE TO BE-- SO LARGE--?
ONCE INSIDE, SHE WORKS THE SPRING FROM INSIDE TO CLOSE THE DOOR BEHIND THEM...
...AS THE BARBARIAN-KING LIES SNORING LIKE A HIBERNATING BEAR.
LIGHT COMES FAINTLY THROUGH SEVERAL NARROW WINDOW SLITS AS THANARA HURRIES DOWN THE TWISTING, SERPENTINE STAIRS--
--TO EMERGE IN THE FLAMING HELL THAT WAS FORT WAKLA.
DRUNK ON THE CONTENTS OF TURANIAN WINE CELLARS, ZUAGIR TORCHMEN HAVE SET FIRE TO EVERY HOUSE.

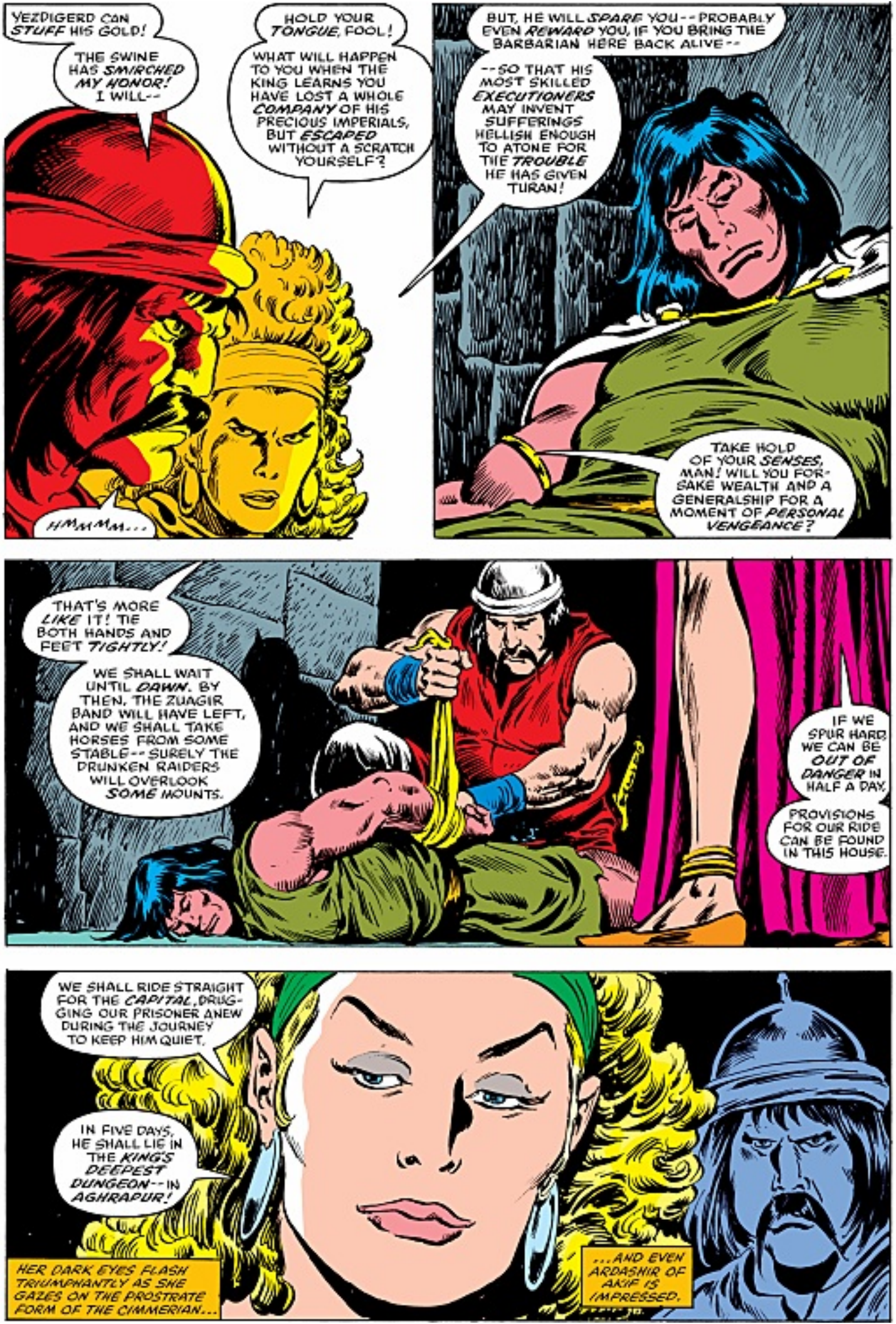

HARDENED TO A LIFE OF RAW EXPERIENCE, THANARA HURRIES THROUGH THE CORPSE-LADEN, SMOKE-FILLED STREETS... HER WAY LIT ONLY BY THE GUTTERING FLAMES OF BURNING HOUSES.
AT THE LAUGHING SOUND OF THE APPROACH OF A ZUAGIR BAND, SHE MELTS INTO DARK DOORWAYS...
BUT MOSTLY, THE DESERT WOLVES ARE NOT LOOKING TO FIND LIVING SOULS WANDERING THE AVENUES OF THE DYING FORT... FOR, WHAT SANE PERSON WOULD VENTURE FORTH INTO THIS HOLOCAUST?

AT THE BARRACKS, THE SLAUGHTER HAS BEEN AWFUL...
FOR THE CORNERED SOLDIERS, RUSHING OUT THROUGH THE ONLY EXIT, HAD OBVIOUSLY RUN INTO A HAIL OF ARROWS FROM THE WAITING ZUAGIR ARCHERS.
BLINDED BY SMOKE AND CONFUSED BY SLEEP, NONE OF THEM HAD HAD A CHANCE.

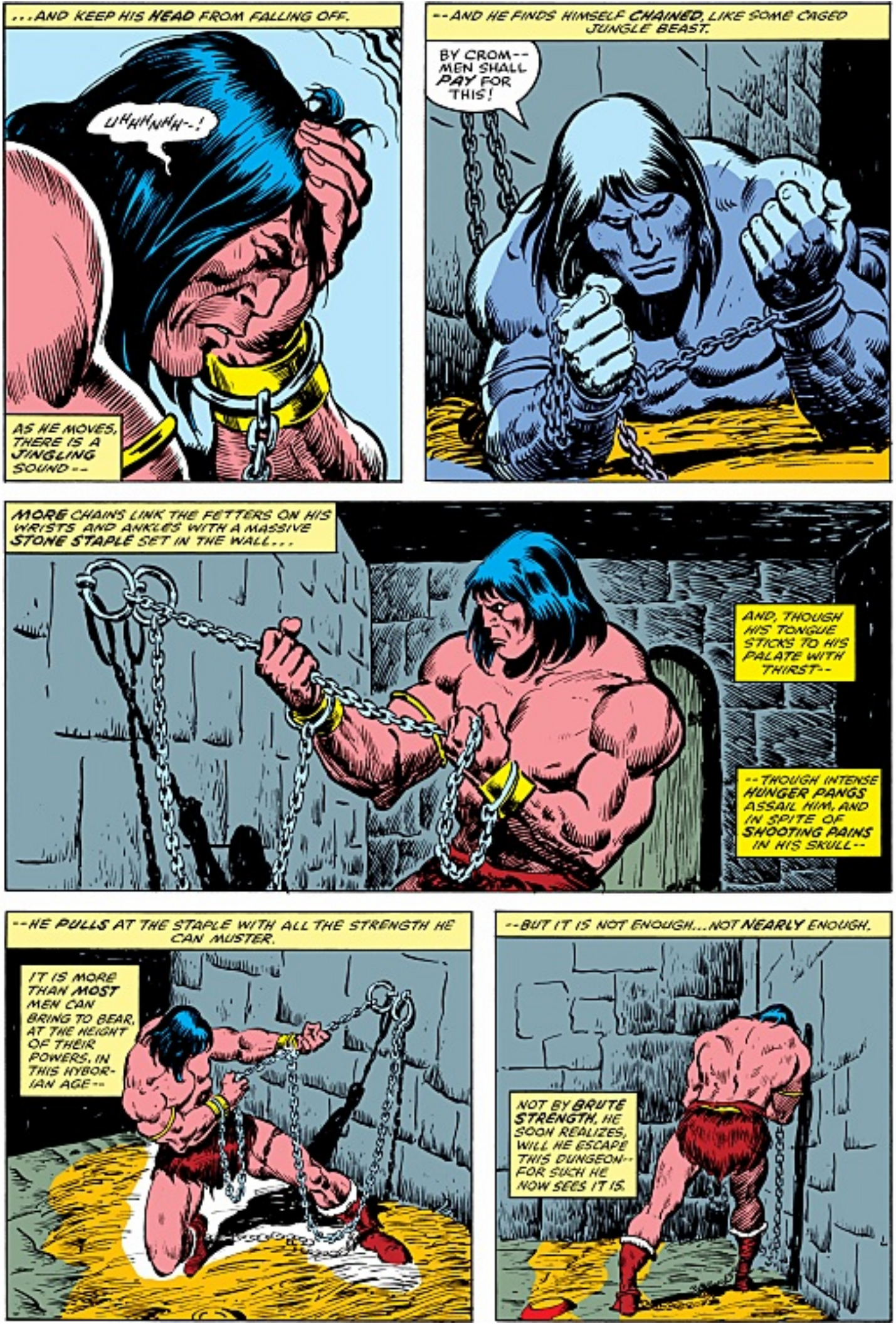
NOW, AS THANARA PASSES THE MOUTH OF A SMALL LANE--
MMMFFF
WHO--?
AN IMPERIAL GUARDSMAN, FROM HIS CLOTHING!
BUT--BOUND AND TRUSSED, LIKE A CALF FOR BRANDING--?!

ARDASHIR OF AKIF!
HOW CAME YOU TO THIS SORRY PASS? SURELY IT WAS NO DRUNKEN ZUAGIR WHO TOOK THE TIME TO--
IT WAS THAT CURSED DEVIL CONAN--ONCE THEIR WAR-CHIEF! HE HAS RETURNED, MILADY THANARA!
THAT I KNOW, FULL WELL AS YOU.
NOW COME--AND KEEP SILENT!
WITH THE HABITS OF AN OLD SOLDIER, ARDASHIR ACCEPTS HER LEADERSHIP WITHOUT ARGUMENT.
THE JOURNEY BACK TO THE GOVERNOR'S PALACE IS MOSTLY UNEVENTFUL, EVEN AMID THE CARNAGE...
MADE BLEARY-EYED AS MUCH BY EASY TRIUMPHS AS BY WINE, THE TWO ZUAGIRS CHARGE, SWORDS ALOFT--
...SAVE FOR ONE PAIR OF LEERING, DRUNKEN DESERT RAIDERS:
WELL, WELL... WHAT HAVE WE HERE, DOG-BROTHER?
A WENCH, BY THE SAND-DEMONS!
HAIII!
LET ME FINISH THIS FLAGON, AND WE'LL KILL THE DOG WITH HER, SO WE CAN--
ARDASHIR--!
LEAVE THEM TO ME, MILADY!
BUT THEY CANNOT MATCH THE SWIFT STROKES OF ARDASHIR'S SCIMITAR...
YYYYY

...AND SOON, NO ONE OPPOSES THE TURANIANS' PATH BACK TO THE PALACE.
AAAAWRRK
YOU HAVE DONE WELL, ARDASHIR OF ARIF.
KING YEZDIGERD HIMSELF WILL REWARD YOU FOR YOUR ACTIONS ON MY BEHALF THIS DAY.
AND ON HIS OWN, AS THEY BOTH KNOW.
BEST HURRY, MILADY THANARA! I HEAR ZUAGIR VOICES--!
I MADE NOTE OF THE SECRET SPRING WHEN I CAME OUT, SO I--AH! HERE IT IS!
I HAVE A SURPRISE FOR YOU AT THE TOP OF THESE STAIRS, GUARDSMAN.
A SURPRISE? SURELY, AMID ALL THIS BLOOD-LETTING, THERE'S NO TIME TO--
HAH!? THAT DOG CONAN!
BY THE GODS, I'LL--
CALM YOURSELF! KNOW YOU NOT THAT THE KING WILL SHOWER US WITH GOLD IF WE BRING THE BARBARIAN TO HIM ALIVE?


YEZDIGERD CAN STUFF HIS GOLD!
THE SWINE HAS SMIRCHED MY HONOR! I WILL--
HOLD YOUR TONGUE, FOOL!
WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOU WHEN THE KING LEARNS YOU HAVE LOST A WHOLE COMPANY OF HIS PRECIOUS IMPERIALS, BUT ESCAPED WITHOUT A SCRATCH YOURSELF?
HMMMM...
BUT, HE WILL SPARE YOU--PROBABLY EVEN REWARD YOU, IF YOU BRING THE BARBARIAN HERE BACK ALIVE--
--SO THAT HIS MOST SKILLED EXECUTIONERS MAY INVENT SUFFERINGS HELLISH ENOUGH TO ATONE FOR THE TROUBLE HE HAS GIVEN TURAN!
TAKE HOLD OF YOUR SENSES, MAN! WILL YOU FORSAKE WEALTH AND A GENERALSHIP FOR A MOMENT OF PERSONAL VENGEANCE?
THAT'S MORE LIKE IT! TIE BOTH HANDS AND FEET TIGHTLY!
WE SHALL WAIT UNTIL DAWN. BY THEN, THE ZUAGIR BAND WILL HAVE LEFT, AND WE SHALL TAKE HORSES FROM SOME STABLE--SURELY THE DRUNKEN RAIDERS WILL OVERLOOK SOME MOUNTS.
IF WE SPUR HARD, WE CAN BE OUT OF DANGER IN HALF A DAY.
PROVISIONS FOR OUR RIDE CAN BE FOUND IN THIS HOUSE.
WE SHALL RIDE STRAIGHT FOR THE CAPITAL, DRUGGING OUR PRISONER ANEW DURING THE JOURNEY TO KEEP HIM QUIET.
IN FIVE DAYS, HE SHALL LIE IN THE KING'S DEEPEST DUNGEON--IN AGHRAPUR!
HER DARK EYES FLASH TRIUMPHANTLY AS SHE GAZES ON THE PROSTRATE FORM OF THE CIMMERIAN...
...AND EVEN ARDASHIR OF AKIF IS IMPRESSED.

Days later, in Aghrapur:
With head whirling, stomach knotted with nausea, and throat parched, Conan the Cimmerian slowly regains his senses,
His last memory is of sitting on the sumptuous couch of Veziz Shah, governor of Fort Wakla...
But even before smarting eyelids creep open, the stench in his nostrils tells him he is no longer in a governor's palace.
Rats scatter loathesomely, as he struggles both to sit up--


...AND KEEP HIS HEAD FROM FALLING OFF.
UHHHNNH-!
AS HE MOVES, THERE IS A JINGLING SOUND--
--AND HE FINDS HIMSELF CHAINED, LIKE SOME CAGED JUNGLE BEAST.
BY CROM-- MEN SHALL PAY FOR THIS!
MORE CHAINS LINK THE FETTERS ON HIS WRISTS AND ANKLES WITH A MASSIVE STONE STAPLE SET IN THE WALL...
AND, THOUGH HIS TONGUE STICKS TO HIS PALATE WITH THIRST--
--THOUGH INTENSE HUNGER PANGS ASSAIL HIM, AND IN SPITE OF SHOOTING PAINS IN HIS SKULL--
--HE PULLS AT THE STAPLE WITH ALL THE STRENGTH HE CAN MUSTER.
IT IS MORE THAN MOST MEN CAN BRING TO BEAR, AT THE HEIGHT OF THEIR POWERS, IN THIS HYBORIAN AGE--
--BUT IT IS NOT ENOUGH...NOT NEARLY ENOUGH.
NOT BY BRUTE STRENGTH, HE SOON REALIZES, WILL HE ESCAPE THIS DUNGEON-- FOR SUCH HE NOW SEES IT IS.

AYE, AND A TALE THAT WILL BE TOLD

NEXT ISSUE: **THE SEA OF BLOOD!**

KING CONAN

c/o MARVEL COMICS GROUP
575 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022

LOUISE JONES
EDITOR
DANNY FINGEROTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Marvel,

Time flies when you're reading comics. It's difficult to believe that it's been over ten years since Thoth-Amon made his first appearance in the pages of CONAN THE BARBARIAN #7.

Back then, who would've ever thought that there would one day be a companion comic named KING CONAN, or that the final epic confrontation between the evil wizard and the barbarian king would take place in the fourth issue of that publication.

Now, after a decade, it's all over. Despite all his scheming, I'll miss the old boy. In his own way, he was the Dr. Doom of the Hyborian Age. However, I'm sure that he'll be replaced by a host of malefic successors during the course of the next ten years. I can hardly wait.

Kevin C. McConnell
118 Main Avenue
Warren, PA 16365

Dear Staff,

This is the first letter I've ever written to any Marvel comic and I'm glad to say it's to one of my favorite magazines. I've only been collecting comics for one year now and I'm very, very impressed with the work being done at Marvel. The most valuable and most important item I own is my comic collection.

I'm pleased to say that KING CONAN #4 will sit near the top of my collection. "Shadows in the Skull" was magnificent. The team of Roy Thomas and John Buscema was wonderful! I'm looking forward to seeing more of their work on the KING CONAN magazine.

The relationship between Conan and his son, Prince Conn, is definitely one of unbreakable love and care. One character always seems to be looking out for the other. Prince Conn is undoubtedly following in his father's footsteps. He plays a very important role in this book. He was the first to figure out that the women were really the serpent folk and later on in the story he comes to his father's rescue and unexpectedly slays Thoth-Amon from behind. But is Thoth-Amon *really* dead?

That was the second time Prince Conn saved his father's life. As I recall, in KING CONAN #3, Prince Conn slew King Menaunii, breaking the ghostly serpent spell that was overcoming Conan. Please don't ever take Conn out of this magazine. I can relate to him so much because he's my age.

I especially like the ending where Conan thanked his son for saving his life, and then the two walked off into battle together. Let's just hope no conflict arises between the two. They're terrific.

Bob Filacchione
10 Weston Lane
Smithtown, NY 11787

People,

Having just bought and read KING CONAN #4, I can only say it was great! I have always wanted Conan to meet up with the serpent-men face to face. Do you pronounce "Conan" with a long or a short "o"?

Troy Mecey
Rt. #1
Bonne Terre, MO 63628

With a long "o".

Dear Roy, John, and Ernie,

KING CONAN is the best comic I've seen in years. It's Great!!! I'm looking forward to the next KING CONAN ish.

Joe Bagley
Box 185
Prentice, WI 54550

Dear KING CONAN crew,

First I would like to compliment your very fine work, both story- and art-wise. But I have a few questions to ask.

1) Why wasn't Barry Windsor-Smith asked to be guest artist for KING CONAN #3? And will Barry Smith be appearing in future issues?

2) I'm an art student and lover of illustration and I wonder, will there someday be printed a special mag for the newest artists to send their work into?

3) Will any of REH's other works be put into special magazines of their own?

Again I must compliment you guys for the great facial expressions and highest excellence of character portrayals I have seen ina long time. Thanks for making comic books worth the cost!

Valorie Furlano
Providence, RI

To answer your questions, Valorie:

1) Barry's present interest lies in illustration, not comics, but he knows that if ever he has it in mind to take pen to comic book page, he'll hear a rousing cheer from Conan readers the world over.

2) At present, no magazine featuring the work of new artists exclusively is scheduled, but who knows about the future? They don't call us the House of Ideas for nuthin'.

3) Although no other REH characters are scheduled to get their own magazines at present, issue #26 of BIZARRE ADVENTURES will feature REH's King Kull, while issue #28 of the same magazine will feature Red Sonja. They're special stories you won't want to miss!

Dear Editor:

I know Conan can't stay young forever, but personally I hate the idea of him growing a moustache or beard! A few age lines and a 5 o'clock shadow are enough for me. American Indian men pulled out their whiskers as they grew in. Could you make this the tradition in Aquilonia?

And, seeing that Conan can't stay around forever, are you planning any Prince Conn adventures in the distant future?

Debbie Billieux
Bug Hill Road
Ashfield, MA

Although we cannot imagine a future without Conan, Debbie, that future Conan will, as far as we can see, remain clean shaven. So you can breathe a sigh of relief.

We've received several requests for stories about the adventures of Prince Conn, however, and *that's* certainly something to consider.

Dear folks,

KING CONAN #4 was indeed different than I had expected. I thought that King Conan would fight Thoth-Amon until both were weak and then, with every last ounce of energy, Conan would hurl his sword right into TA's heart. But, to my surprise, Prince Conn killed him. Well, I will say that, although kids are people, too, Conan deserves to kill the worst men.

Also, Prince Conn had a girl. Well, do you think that the younger readers of this book should see this, although it's everywhere else? I mean, there should be somewhere they can turn to to see something but sex. (Although Conn *is* Conan's son!)

Also I would like to ask, How does Buscema draw KING CONAN, CONAN, SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN and still have time to do his own books?

Larry Jones
Meridian, MS 39701

Big John Buscema works very, very fast and very, very hard. He is also very, very good!

'Til next issue —
Louise Jones

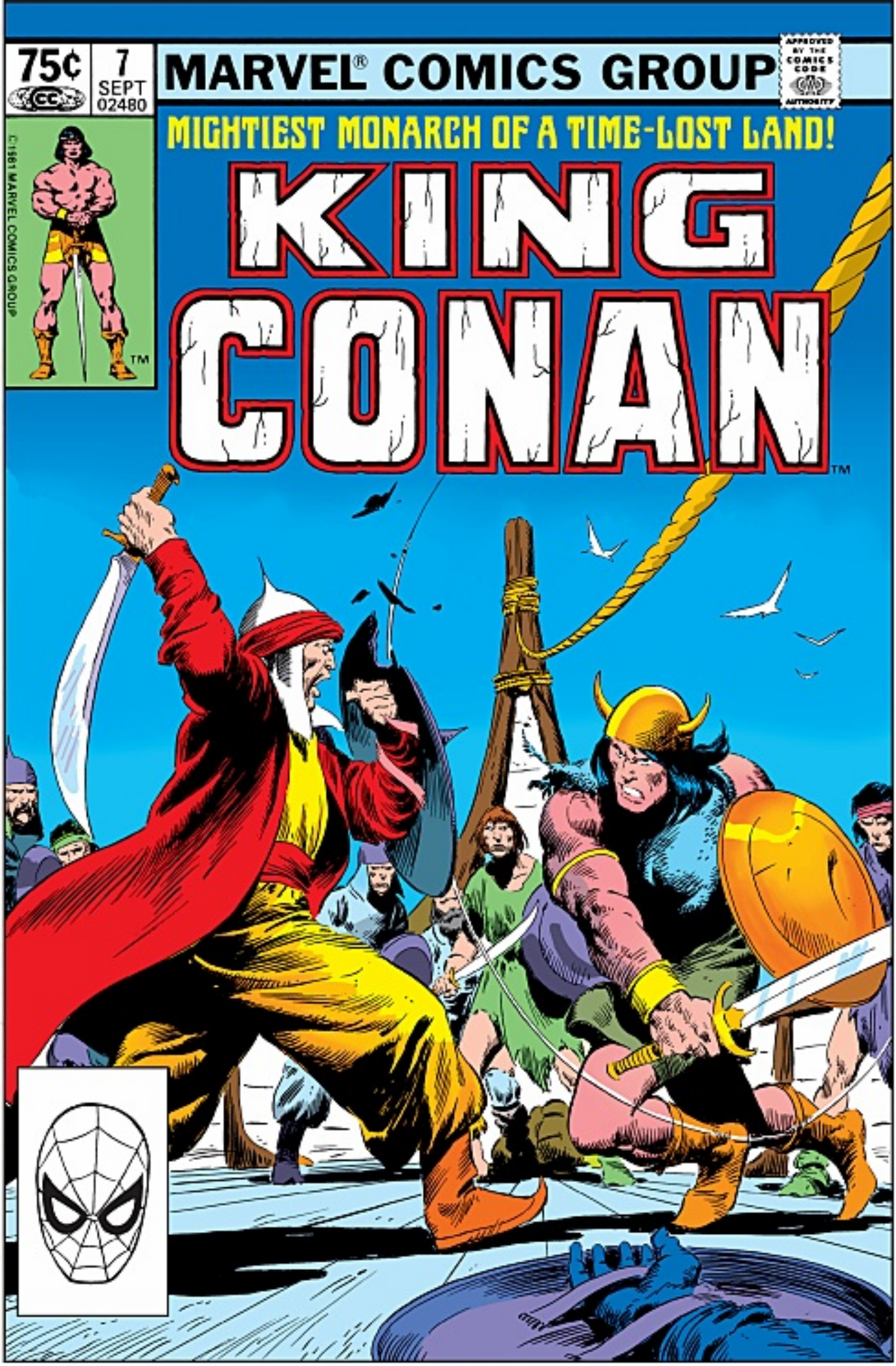
THE MIGHTY MARVEL CHECKLIST

- ☐ **MARVEL TWO-IN-ONE #76** — **Giant-Man** and the **Iceman** join the ever-lovin', blue-eyed **Thing**!
- ☐ **SPIDER-WOMAN #38** — Guest-starring the uncanny ***X-Men***!
- ☐ **STAR TREK #14** — "We Are Dying, Egypt, Dying!"
- ☐ **DAREDEVIL #171** — DD vs. the Kingpin!
- ☐ **MARVEL SUPER HEROES #98** — (Reprints Hulk #149) — "The Inheritor from Beyond!"
- ☐ **DAZZLER #4** — Final battle with **Dr. Doom**! Plus: *Nightmare*!
- ☐ **KA-ZAR #3** — The tear-fraught fate of Shanna!
- ☐ **KING CONAN # 6** — Conan's quest for his kidnapped queen!
- ☐ **AMAZING SPIDER-MAN #217** — *Sand-Man* and *Hydro-Man* team up and attack!
- ☐ **CAPTAIN AMERICA #258** — Who is ...*Blockbuster*?
- ☐ **THOR #308** — Loki and Karnilla attack New York!
- ☐ **MICRONAUTS #30** — "To Save Homeworld!"
- ☐ **GHOST RIDER #57** — Enter: The Apparition!
- ☐ **SAVAGE SHE-HULK #17** — "Make Way for...the Man-Elephant!"
- ☐ **MOON KNIGHT #8** — Moon Knight goes *mad*!
- ☐ **DR. STRANGE #47** — Dr. Strange — powerless against Ikonn, the master of illusion!
- ☐ **INCREDIBLE HULK #260** — Showdown in Japan with Glenn Talbot!
- ☐ **AVENGERS #208** — The mad menace of the eternal warrior called the *Berserker*!
- ☐ **CONAN #123** — "Horror Beneath the Hills!"
- ☐ **MARVEL TALES #128** — (Reprints Spider-Man # 151) — The shocking return of a suprise super-villain!
- ☐ **X-MEN #146** — The old and new X-Men at the mercy of ***Dr. Doom***! Plus: Arcade!
- ☐ **ROM #19** — ROM is trapped in Limbo — with all his old foes!
- ☐ **POWER MAN/IRON FIST # 70** — Cage and the Fist hot on the trail of drug smugglers!
- ☐ **FANTASTIC FOUR #231** — Stygiax blasts the Baxter Building into the Negative Zone!
- ☐ **MARVEL TEAM-UP #106** — Spidey and **Captain America**!
- ☐ **IRON MAN #147** — A crisis called *...Blacklash*!
- ☐ **PETER PARKER #55** — The menace of Nitro, the Exploding Man!
- ☐ **DEFENDERS #96** — The Defenders and **Ghost Rider** at the mercy of the Six-Fingered Hand!
- ☐ **MARVEL SUPER ACTION #32** — (Reprints Avengers #71) The Avengers and the Black Knight vs. The Grand-Master and Kang!
- ☐ **STAR WARS #48** — Leia and Vader play a strange game of power, propoganda,... and Death!
- ☐ **MASTER OF KUNG FU #101** — *"Not Smoke, Nor Beads, Nor Blood!"*
- ☐ **MARVEL PREMIERE #60** — Featuring... **Dr. Who! Cover painting by** *Paul Gulacy*.
- ☐ **SGT. FURY #164** — (Reprints Sgt. Fury #70) — Meet: the Missouri Marauders!
- ☐ **WHAT IF #27** — *"What If* **Phoenix** *Had Lived?"*

MARVEL MAGAZINES

- ☐ **CRAZY #74** — "Crazy Cars of the Future"; "Finger vs. Finger"; "The Elephink Man!"; a "Dallas" parody; Kinetic Kids; Obnoxio; Howard the Duck; and more. Whew!
- ☐ **SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN #64** — The terrible secret of the "Children of Rhan!"
- ☐ **MARVEL PREVIEW #26** — King Kull stars in Doug Moench and **John Bolton's** "Demon In a Silvered Glass!", featuring some of the finest artwork to ever grace a Marvel production. And the writing ain't nothin' to sneeze at, either!

--A MIGHTY MARVEL
KING CONAN
PIN-UP!



COVER PENCILER & INKER: JOHN BUSCEMA

"Know, O prince, that the man called Conan was all things in his day: a thief, a reaver, a slayer... fierce sellsword and fiercer pirate... and finally, usurper king of proud, civilized Aquilonia, mightiest of Hyborian kingdoms... with his queen Zenobia at his side, and his son Prince Conn ripe to carry on the legend. ."

—*The Nemedian Chronicles.*

Stan Lee PRESENTS: **KING CONAN**

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By *ROBERT E. HOWARD*

A CLASH OF KINGS!

SOMEWHERE ON THE ROAD BACK TO AQUILONIA, *COUNT TROCERO* CONTINUES THE TALE HE TELLS *PRINCE CONN*, SON OF CONAN:

I STILL SEE IT *NOW*, YOUNG PRINCE, AS IT WAS RECOUNTED TO ME LATER BY YOUR FATHER--

--*KING CONAN*, MONARCH OF AQUILONIA, MUNCHING STALE BREAD IN THE DUNGEONS OF HIS OLD ENEMY *YEZDIGERD*, KING OF TURAN.

AND PERHAPS IT BOTHERED HIM *MOST* OF ALL THAT HE HAD BEEN CAPTURED BECAUSE OF...

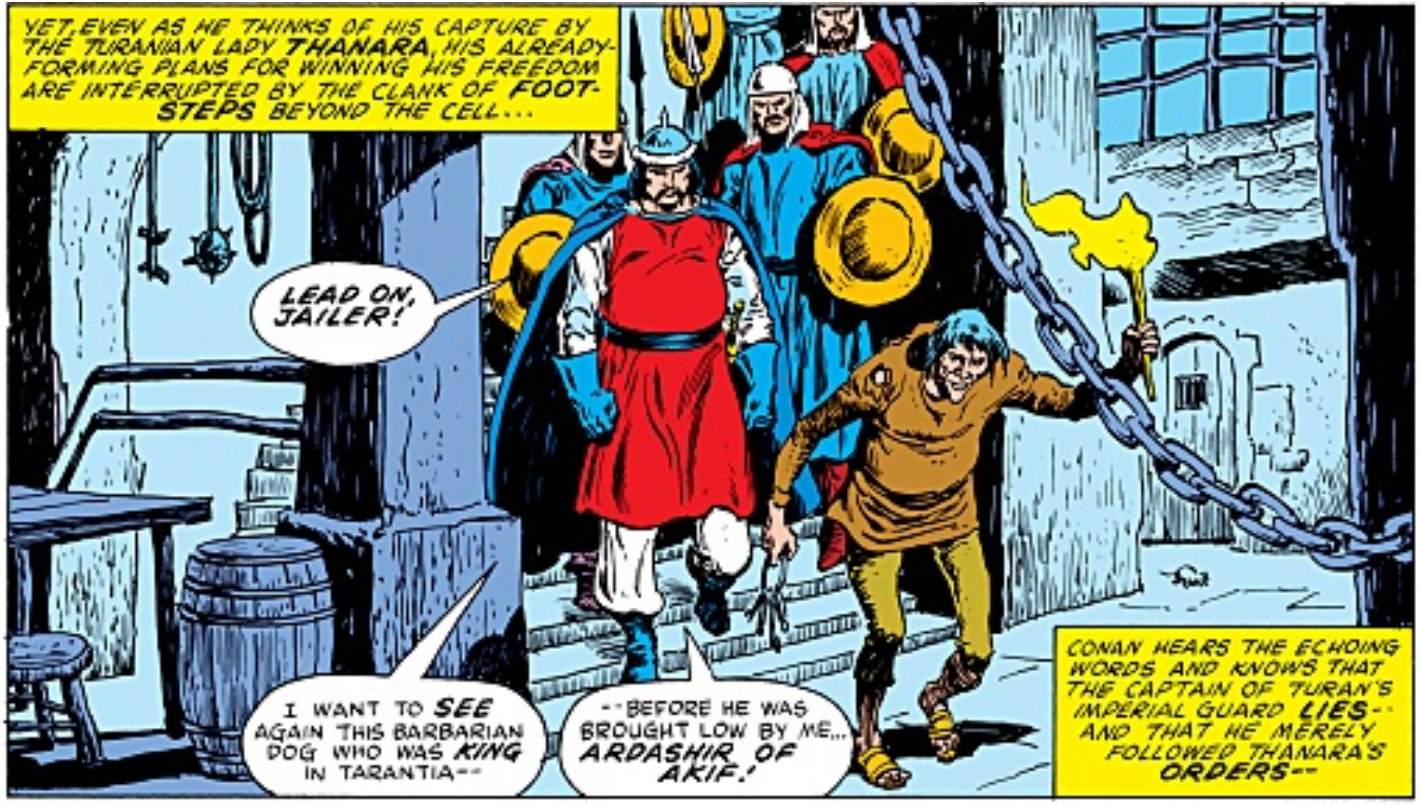
*FROM LAST ISSUE--R.T.

--A *WOMAN*, CURSE HER DEVIOUS SOUL!

CONTINUING OUR ADAPTATION OF THE NOVEL BY *L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & LIN CARTER*

FEATURING THE HERO CREATED BY *ROBERT E. HOWARD*.

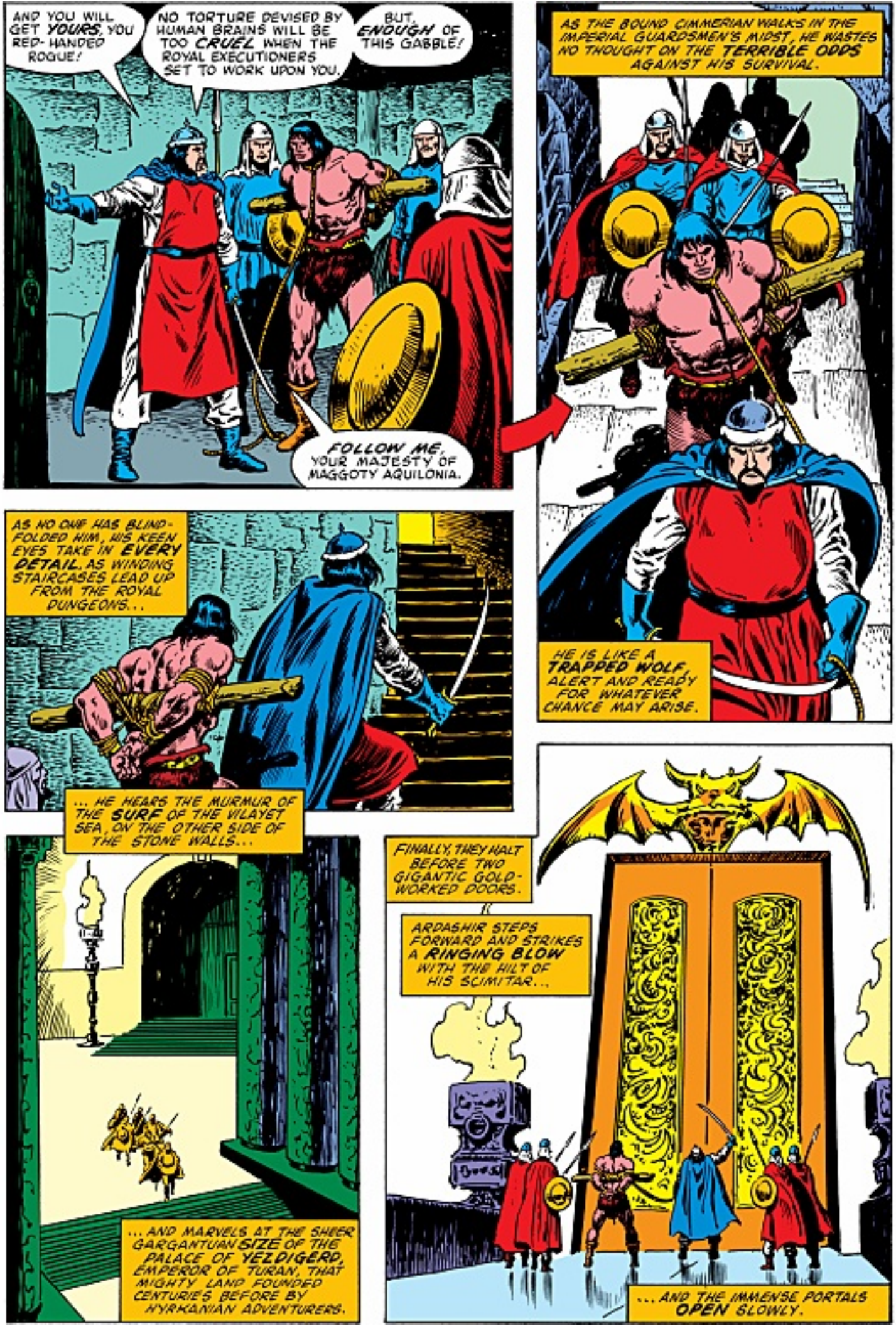
ROY THOMAS * *JOHN BUSCEMA* & *ERNIE CHAN*
WRITER ILLUSTRATORS
GEORGE ROUSSOS | *JANICE CHIANG*
COLORIST LETTERER
LOUISE JONES - EDITOR
JIM SHOOTER - EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

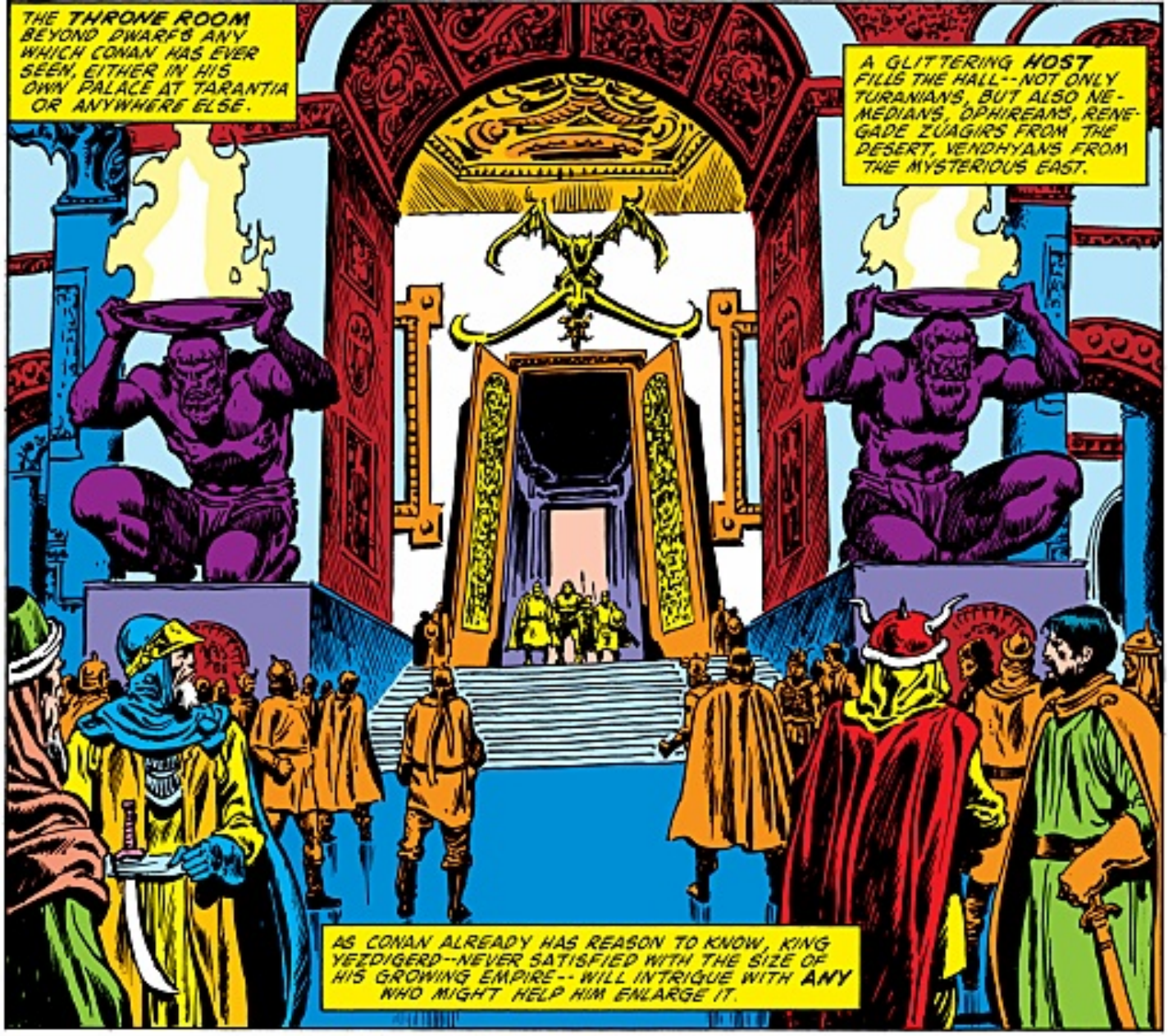

YET, EVEN AS HE THINKS OF HIS CAPTURE BY THE TURANIAN LADY THANARA, HIS ALREADY-FORMING PLANS FOR WINNING HIS FREEDOM ARE INTERRUPTED BY THE CLANK OF FOOT-STEPS BEYOND THE CELL...
LEAD ON, JAILER!
I WANT TO SEE AGAIN THIS BARBARIAN DOG WHO WAS KING IN TARANTIA--
--BEFORE HE WAS BROUGHT LOW BY ME... ARDASHIR OF AKIF!
CONAN HEARS THE ECHOING WORDS AND KNOWS THAT THE CAPTAIN OF TURAN'S IMPERIAL GUARD LIES-- AND THAT HE MERELY FOLLOWED THANARA'S ORDERS--

--BUT NO SENSE ANTAGONIZING THE DOG FURTHER-- FOR THE MOMENT.
SHAPUR! YOU AND VARDAN TRUSS THE BARBARIAN SECURELY, AND SLING A NOOSE ABOUT HIS NECK!
YOU-- ARCHERS-- STAND BY TO PREVENT ANY TRICKS!
YES, CAPTAIN ARDASHIR.

ONE FALSE MOVE, DOG, AND YOUR HEART SHALL KNOW THE MARKSMANSHIP OF MY ARCHERS!
I SHOULD DEARLY LOVE TO SLAY YOU MYSELF-- BUT YOU ARE THE KING'S OWN MEAT.

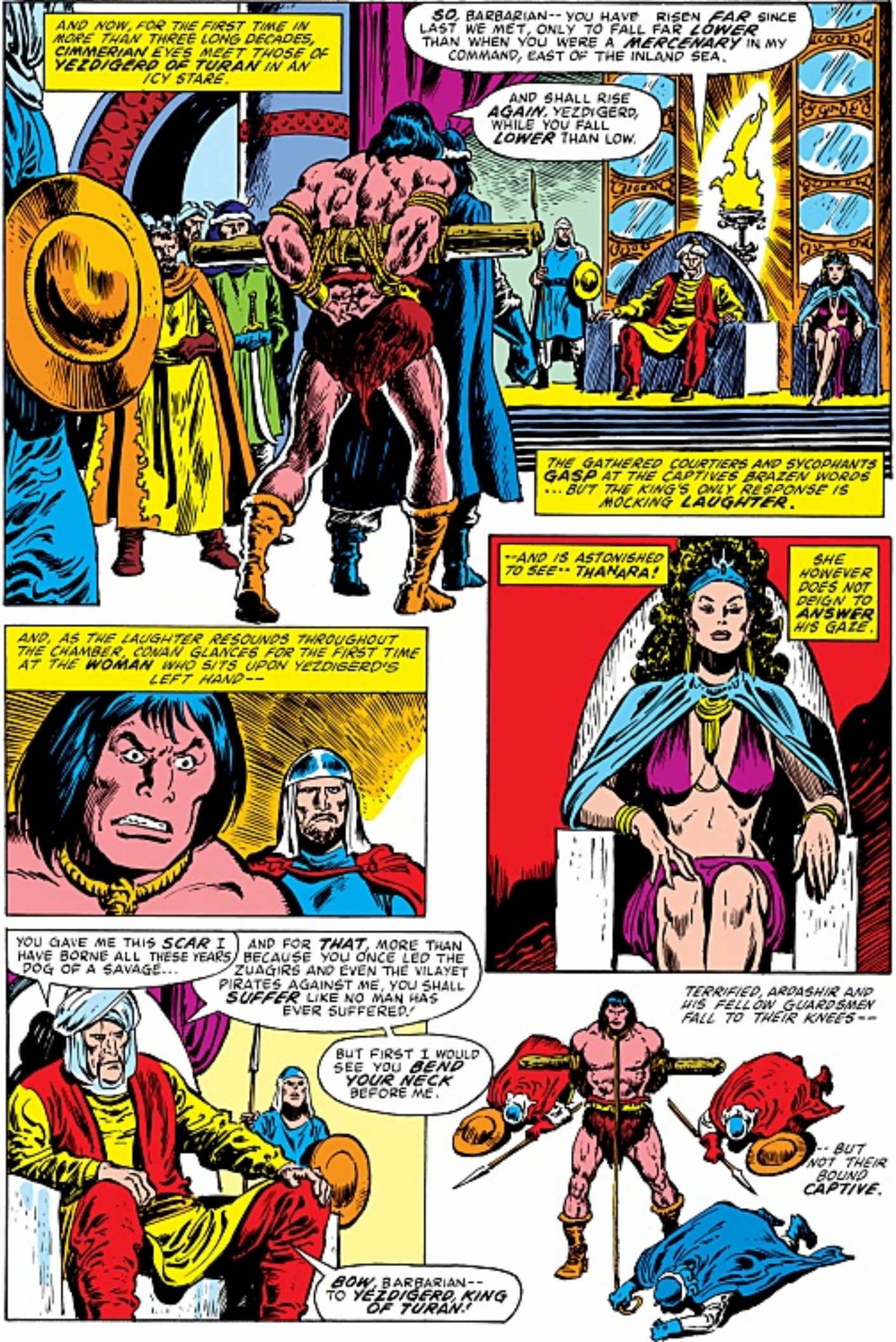
AS THE SOLDIERS FASTEN THEIR LOG IN PLACE, CONAN'S CHILL BLUE EYES REGARD THE MADDENED OFFICER WITHOUT EMOTION.
YOU TURANIAN SWINE WILL GET WHAT YOU DESERVE SOONER OR LATER... YOU WILL SEE.
AT THE SAME TIME, AND WITHOUT APPARENT EFFORT, HE TENSES HIS HUGE ARM MUSCLES...
...SO THAT HIS ROPES ARE STRETCHED TO THEIR GREATEST TAUTNESS AT THE MOMENT OF TYING.


AND YOU WILL GET YOURS, YOU RED-HANDED ROGUE!
NO TORTURE DEVISED BY HUMAN BRAINS WILL BE TOO CRUEL WHEN THE ROYAL EXECUTIONERS SET TO WORK UPON YOU.
BUT, ENOUGH OF THIS GABBLE!
FOLLOW ME, YOUR MAJESTY OF MAGGOTY AQUILONIA.
AS THE BOUND CIMMERIAN WALKS IN THE IMPERIAL GUARDSMEN'S MIDST, HE WASTES NO THOUGHT ON THE TERRIBLE ODDS AGAINST HIS SURVIVAL.
HE IS LIKE A TRAPPED WOLF, ALERT AND READY FOR WHATEVER CHANCE MAY ARISE.
AS NO ONE HAS BLINDFOLDED HIM, HIS KEEN EYES TAKE IN EVERY DETAIL, AS WINDING STAIRCASES LEAD UP FROM THE ROYAL DUNGEONS...
... HE HEARS THE MURMUR OF THE SURF OF THE VILAYET SEA, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STONE WALLS...
... AND MARVELS AT THE SHEER GARGANTUAN SIZE OF THE PALACE OF YEZDIGERD, EMPEROR OF TURAN, THAT MIGHTY LAND FOUNDED CENTURIES BEFORE BY HYRKANIAN ADVENTURERS.
FINALLY, THEY HALT BEFORE TWO GIGANTIC GOLD-WORKED DOORS.
ARDASHIR STEPS FORWARD AND STRIKES A RINGING BLOW WITH THE HILT OF HIS SCIMITAR...
... AND THE IMMENSE PORTALS OPEN SLOWLY.


THE THRONE ROOM BEYOND DWARFS ANY WHICH CONAN HAS EVER SEEN, EITHER IN HIS OWN PALACE AT TARANTIA OR ANYWHERE ELSE.
A GLITTERING HOST FILLS THE HALL--NOT ONLY TURANIANS, BUT ALSO NEMEDIANS, OPHIREANS, RENEGADE ZUAGIRS FROM THE DESERT, VENDHYANS FROM THE MYSTERIOUS EAST.
AS CONAN ALREADY HAS REASON TO KNOW, KING YEZDIGERD--NEVER SATISFIED WITH THE SIZE OF HIS GROWING EMPIRE-- WILL INTRIGUE WITH ANY WHO MIGHT HELP HIM ENLARGE IT.

THEN, TO THE BLARE OF GOLDEN TRUMPETS, AN AVENUE OPENS THROUGH THE MILLING MASS...
...AND CONAN WONDERS WHAT FORM YEZDIGERD'S VENGEANCE WILL TAKE, FOR THE WOUND HE DEALT THE TURANIAN YEARS BEFORE AT DOOMED MAKKALET.*
*CONAN#19 --R.T.

MUSING THUS INTENTLY, CONAN FAILS TO NOTICE THE LONE YELLOW-HAIRED WARRIOR, OBVIOUSLY A NORTHERNER, STANDING AMID THE THRONG--
--LET ALONE THE SLIGHTEST WIDENING OF THE BLOND GIANT'S GREY EYES IN SUDDEN RECOGNITION, BEFORE HE CATCHES HIMSELF AND RETURNS TO AN IMAGE OF IMPERTURBABILITY.


AND NOW, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MORE THAN THREE LONG DECADES, CIMMERIAN EYES MEET THOSE OF YEZDIGERD OF TURAN IN AN ICY STARE.
SO, BARBARIAN-- YOU HAVE RISEN FAR SINCE LAST WE MET, ONLY TO FALL FAR LOWER THAN WHEN YOU WERE A MERCENARY IN MY COMMAND, EAST OF THE INLAND SEA.
AND SHALL RISE AGAIN, YEZDIGERD, WHILE YOU FALL LOWER THAN LOW.
THE GATHERED COURTIERS AND SYCOPHANTS GASP AT THE CAPTIVES BRAZEN WORDS ... BUT THE KING'S ONLY RESPONSE IS MOCKING LAUGHTER.
--AND IS ASTONISHED TO SEE-- THANARA!
SHE HOWEVER DOES NOT DEIGN TO ANSWER HIS GAZE.
AND, AS THE LAUGHTER RESOUNDS THROUGHOUT THE CHAMBER, CONAN GLANCES FOR THE FIRST TIME AT THE WOMAN WHO SITS UPON YEZDIGERD'S LEFT HAND--
YOU GAVE ME THIS SCAR I HAVE BORNE ALL THESE YEARS DOG OF A SAVAGE...
AND FOR THAT, MORE THAN BECAUSE YOU ONCE LED THE ZUAGIRS AND EVEN THE VILAYET PIRATES AGAINST ME, YOU SHALL SUFFER LIKE NO MAN HAS EVER SUFFERED!
BUT FIRST I WOULD SEE YOU BEND YOUR NECK BEFORE ME.
BOW, BARBARIAN-- TO YEZDIGERD, KING OF TURAN!
TERRIFIED, ARDASHIR AND HIS FELLOW GUARDSMEN FALL TO THEIR KNEES--
-- BUT NOT THEIR BOUND CAPTIVE.

AND WHEN THE CAPTAIN FROM AKIF SENSES THE STRAIN UPON THE ROPE HE HOLDS--
DOWN, YOU FOOL! BOW BEFORE THE KING!
YOU BOW AND SCRAPE LIKE A DOG SEEKING SCRAPS. I'LL NOT--
DOWN, I SAY!
A THOUSAND PARDONS, MOST HIGH YEZDIGERD, BUT I MUST TEACH THE BARBARIAN HOW TO--
YOU COULDN'T TEACH A HOUND TO SQUAT, TURANIAN!
UHHHN
I PAY HOMAGE TO NO HYKRANIAN PIG WHO WAGES HIS WARS WITH THE HELP OF WOMEN!
CAN YOU HANDLE A SWORD YOURSELF YEZIGERD, ANY BETTER THAN WHEN I CARVED A MAP ON YOUR FACE, YEARS AGO?
GRAB A WEAPON AND I'LL SHOW YOU HOW A REAL MAN FIGHTS!
YEZDIGERD OF TURAN, HOWEVER, DID NOT INCREASE THE BOUNDARIES OF HIS EMPIRE FAR MORE THAN HIS WEAK PREDECESSOR YILDIZ, BY RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES TO SINGLE COMBAT.
I SEE I'LL GAIN NO SATISFACTION FROM THE BARBARIAN UNTIL HE'S BROKEN ON THE RACK.
AND EVEN DURING HIS SHORT, IMPASSIONED SPEECH, CONAN RELAXES THE TAUT MUSCLES OF HIS ARMS --SO THAT THE ROPE BINDING THEM GOES SLACK.
TAKE HIM, THEN-- --AND BEGIN HIS HELL ON EARTH!

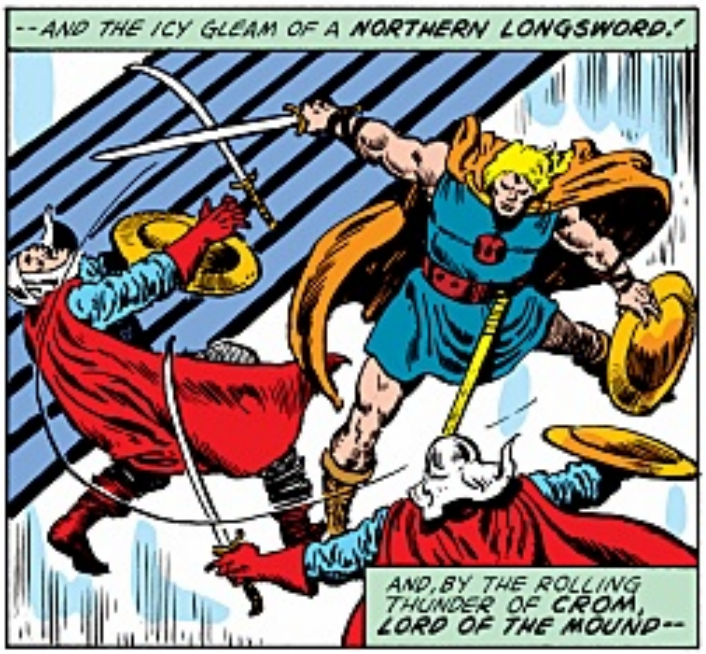
NAY, YEZDIGERD!
I SHALL NOW BEGIN YOURS!
HIS GREAT ARMS POSSESSING MORE LEVERAGE NOW-- CONAN FLEXES HIS MUSCLES--FINDS A WEAK SPOT HE'D NOTED BEFORE IN THE LOG HOLDING HIM AND--
TARIM'S BLOOD! THE DOG HAS BROKEN FREE!
SLAY HIM!
YOU TURANIANS ARE GOOD AT GIVING ORDERS, BE YOU CAPTAIN OR KING!
WHY DON'T YOU COME SLAY ME YOURSELF, ARDASHIR?
BY ERLIK, I SHALL!
AAAAA
AS THE OFFICER IS HURLED ACROSS THE FLOOR BY THE IMPACT, HIS BODY SPINNING LIKE A THROWN DOLL--
--THE THRONG SEEMS TO FREEZE FOR A SPLIT SECOND INTO A SINGLE UNMOVING MASS--
ARRRHH-!
--AND BY THE TIME SEVERAL GUARDSMEN CHARGE HIM, CONAN IS READY ONCE AGAIN WITH BOTH HALVES OF THE WEIGHTY JAGGED-EDGED LOG!

STILL, THE KING OF TURAN IS NEVER SHORT OF IMPERIAL GUARDSMEN READY TO THROW THEMSELVES INTO A FRAY ON HIS BEHALF...
GET HIM! A WILD-EYED BARBARIAN HE MAY BE--
--BUT HE'S STILL ONLY ONE MAN.
YES DOGS--COME AND GET ME!
I'M ONLY ONE MAN--
--BUT THAT'S MORE THAN ALL OF YOU PUT TOGETHER!
GGRRK
NOW, YEZDIGERD, WE STAND ON EQUAL TERMS FOR THE MOMENT, TILL MORE OF YOUR HOUNDS ARRIVE...
...AND IT'S A MOMENT THAT'S BEEN LONG IN COMING!
INDEED IT HAS, YOU RAVENING WOLF--

--THE MOMENT OF YOUR DEATH!
I'LL SAY THIS FOR YOU, TURANIAN --YOU'RE A BRAVER MAN THAN I'D THOUGHT--
--AND THAT'S GOOD, FOR A MAN SHOULD HAVE BRAVE ENEMIES--
--SO THAT HE CAN REMEMBER THEM WHEN HE HAS SLAIN THEM!
SUCH IS THE FORCE OF CONAN'S DOWNWARD STROKE THAT THE KING'S SWORD SNAPS--
--THOUGH THE STEEL CAP BENEATH HIS SNOW-WHITE TURBAN SAVES HIS SKULL FROM BEING CLEAVED.
THEN, BEFORE THE BLOOD-MAD CIMMERIAN CAN AIM ANOTHER BLOW, THIS ONE AT YEZDIGERD'S UNARMORED VITALS...
GUARDS! FORM A LIVING SHIELD AROUND THE KING IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIVES--OR YOUR FAMILIES--!
AND THOUGH CONAN'S PURLOINED SCIMITAR WEAVES A LETHAL NET OF IRON AROUND HIM--
--LOYAL ARMS SOON HAVE DRAGGED YEZDIGERD OUT OF THE PRESS AND AWAY FROM THE DANGER.
NOTHING TO BE GAINED NOW BY A SUICIDAL LEAP FORWARD, CONAN KNOWS--
--SO HE WHIRLS IN GLEEFUL FRENZY, FIRED WITH THE FEROCIOUS VITALITY OF A PANTHER AT BAY!
UNNGN

YET, AS SOLDIERS NOW ADVANCE FROM ALL SIDES--AND EVEN ARCHERS MAY BE NOTCHING THEIR SHAFTS FROM A LITTLE DISTANCE AWAY--CONAN KNOWS THAT NO ONE MAN CAN LONG WITHSTAND SUCH AN ARMY.
THE PROSPECT OF HIS OWN DEATH TROUBLES HIM LITTLE --BUT HAS HE COME SO FAR IN SEARCH OF HIS QUEEN ZENOBIA--ONLY TO FAIL HER, AT THE LAST?

THEN, SUDDENLY, THERE COMES FROM A NEW DIRECTION THE CLASH OF STEEL ON STEEL--
WHO THE DEVIL--?


--AND THE ICY GLEAM OF A NORTHERN LONGSWORD!
AND, BY THE ROLLING THUNDER OF CROM, LORD OF THE MOUND--

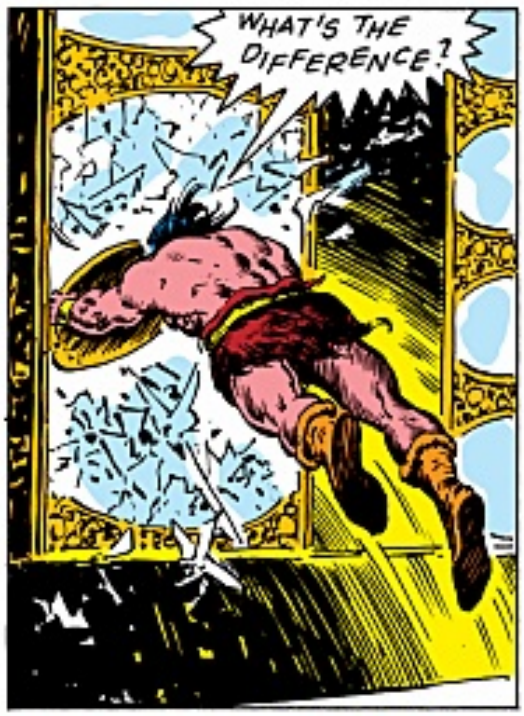
--THE FAR-ROVING KING OF AQUILONIA KNOWS THIS MAN...
ROLF! ROLF OF AESGAARD!
WHAT DO YOU HERE, OLD POLAR BEAR?

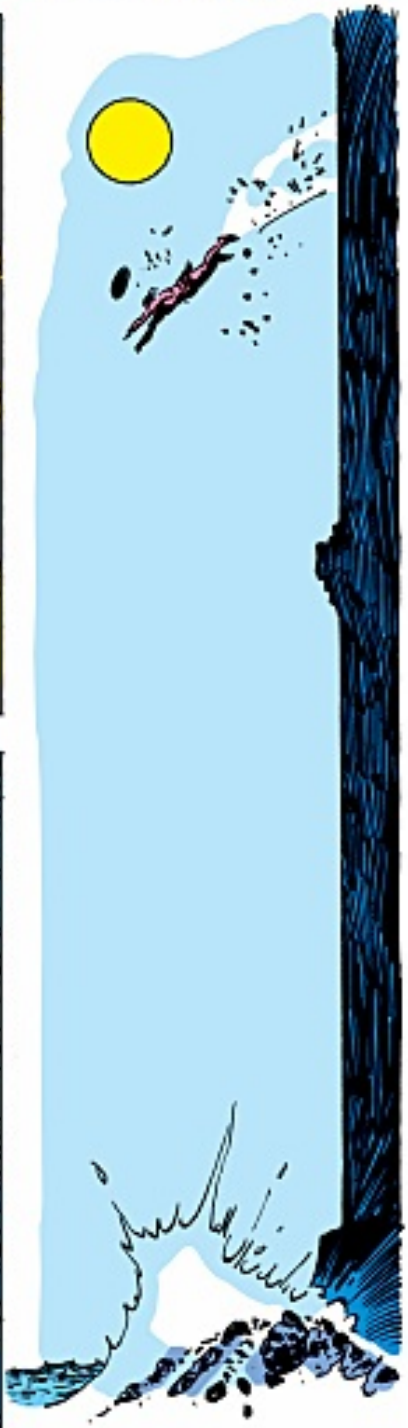
I'LL TELL YOU LATER, CIMMERIAN --IF WE LIVE!
IN THE MEANTIME--CATCH THIS!
THE UNEXPECTED ADVENT OF THIS FORMIDABLE ALLY, RAISES CONAN'S SPIRITS EVEN HIGHER AND--

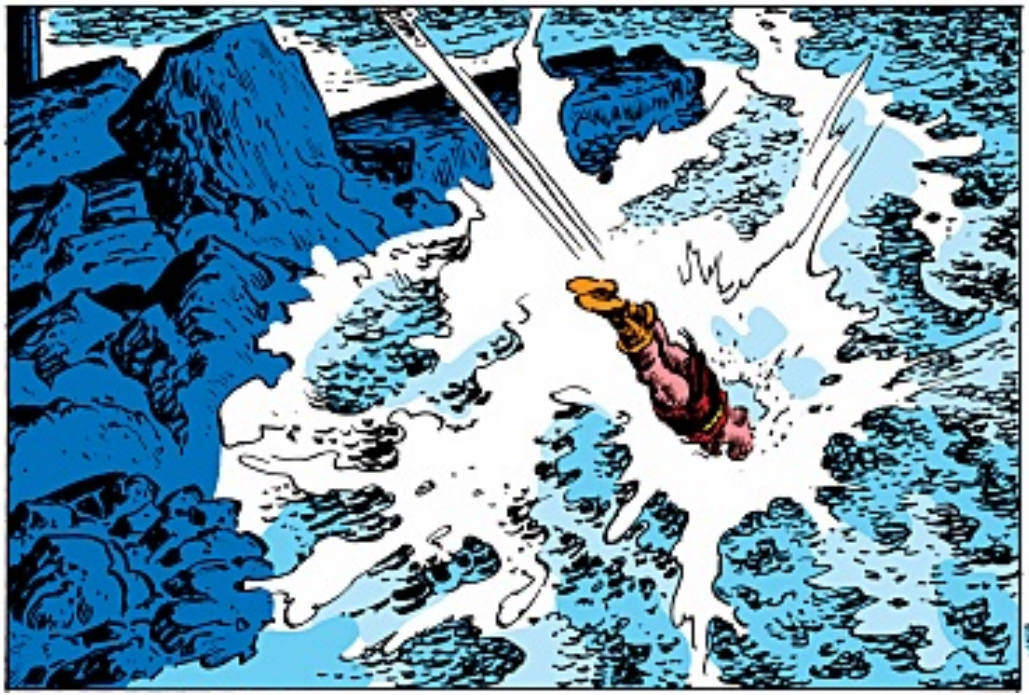
RUSH IN, JACKALS! WHO'LL BE THE NEXT TO CONSIGN HIS SOUL TO HELL?
ATTACK, CURSE YOU --OR I'LL CARRY THE FIGHT TO YOU!

YET, IN THE LONG RUN EVEN TWO CANNOT PREVAIL AGAINST SO MANY...
THEY HAVE US, CONAN!
HAD WE BUT STOUT COATS OF AESGAARDIAN MAIL!
AH, WELL--IT WAS FUN WHILE IT LASTED!
IT'S NOT OVER QUITE YET, MY FRIEND!

THESE WINDOWS! HURRY!
BUT WHAT'S BEYOND THAT, CIMMERIAN?


WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?





CURSE YOU, CONAN--
--YOU'LL BE THE DEATH OF ME YET!
STILL THE TAUNTING LAUGHS OF BOTH CIMMERIAN AND MAN OF AESGAARD LINGER IN THE AIR BEHIND THE MEN AS THEY FALL MORE THAN A HUNDRED FEET...

...AND CONAN IS GLAD HE HEARD THOSE WAVES EARLIER, LAPPING AGAINST THE STONE WALLS OF THE PALACE DUNGEON.

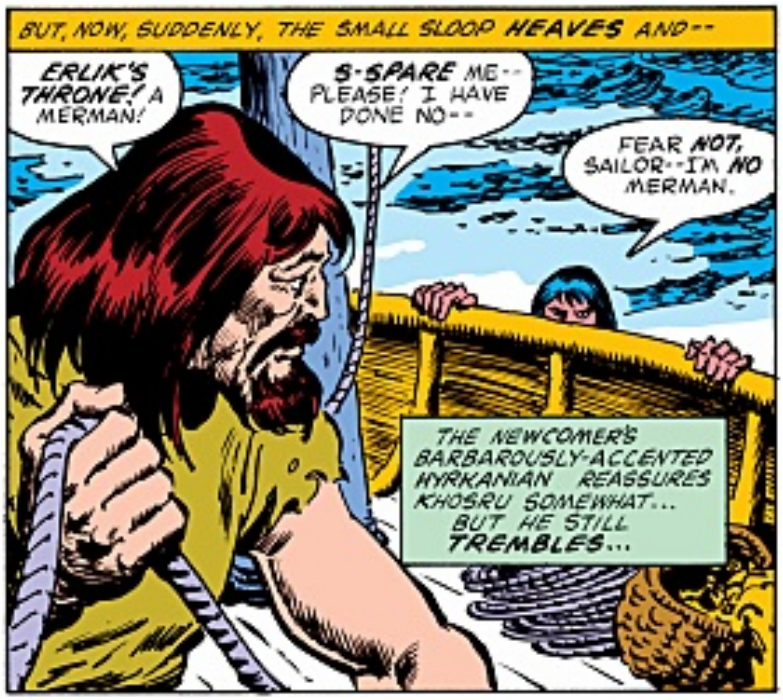
WHILE, HIGH ABOVE...
ARCHERS! AN ARCHER, QUICKLY!
BUT THE VOICE OF ARDASHIR OF AKIF RINGS HOLLOW IN THE VAST THRONE ROOM.

AND SOON AFTER, AS THE GENERAL IN CHARGE REPORTS TO KING YEZDIGERD...
YOU HAVE DARED TO FAIL?
THOSE RED ROGUES HAVE ESCAPED--AND MOCKED THE MAJESTY OF TURAN!
BUT, MY KING, --I--
SILENCE! EVERY TENTH MAN AMONG THE GUARDS SHALL DIE IN THE MORNING TO BOLSTER THE COURAGE OF THE REST!

SEE THAT TWO WAR GALLEYS ARE OUTFITTED AT ONCE!
THE BARBARIANS WILL SURELY TRY TO STEAL A BOAT AND MAKE THEIR WAY ACROSS THE SEA.

SEE THAT THEY ARE OVERTAKEN--AND BROUGHT TO ME TO SUFFER THE AGONIES OF A THOUSAND DEATHS!
YES, MAJESTY!

AT THE PROSPECTS OF CONSIGNING CONAN AND HIS COMRADE TO HIS TORTURE CHAMBERS, YEZDIGERD LAUGHS A GRISLY LAUGH...
...AND THE GENERAL IS GLAD TO TAKE THAT AS AN EXCUSE TO HURRY OUT OF HIS PRESENCE.



KHOSRU'S STRANGE CUSTOMERS LOSE NO TIME-- AND SOON, ITS SAILS BILLOWING IN THE FRESHENING BREEZE, THE TRIM CRAFT GATHERS SPEED AS IT STEERS OUT TOWARD THE EAST--

--AND ONLY THE GOLD COINS HE CLUTCHES ASSURE THE FISHERMAN THAT IT TRULY HAPPENED AT ALL...!

SOME TWENTY HOURS LATER...
EVEN AS ROLF FINISHES THE LONG TALE OF THE WANDERINGS THAT HAD LED HIM TO AGHRAPUR, CONAN THANKS THE UNHEARING GODS FOR THE STIFF BREEZE WHICH IS THE ONLY REASON THEY HAVE OUTDISTANCED ANY PURSUING GALLEYS--
...SO HERE I AM, A FUGITIVE BOTH FROM MY NATIVE AESGAARD AND NOW FROM TURAN, AS WELL.
WHY DID YOU JOIN ME, ROLF?
YOU WERE COMFORTABLY OFF AT THE TURANIAN COURT.
TRULY, CIMMERIAN--DID YOU THINK I HAD FORGOTTEN THE TIME YOU SAVED MY LIFE IN THAT BATTLE WITH THE HYPERBOREANS IN THE GRAASKAL MOUNTAINS?
SO I DID, DIDN'T I?
AFTER SO MANY BATTLES, I HAD FORGOTTEN IT MYSELF!
THAT RASCAL YEZDIGERD WILL BE HOT ON OUR HEELS. HE'LL NOT SOON FORGET HOW WE PULLED HIS BEARD.
AYE! I HOPE THIS FINE WIND KEEPS UP OR ELSE--
YOU KNOW IN MY DAYS WITH THE RED BROTHERHOOD, THIS AREA WAS THE SUREST ONE FOR A SWEEP TO CATCH A FAT MERCHANTMAN OUT FROM SULTANAPUR OR KHAWARIZM.
THIS INLAND SEA IS STILL A TURANIAN LAKE, AS THEY SAY--BUT STILL THEY'VE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO SWEEP IT CLEAR OF PIRATES.
IT'S WELL KNOWN, CONAN, HOW YOU UNITED THE RED BROTHERHOOD AND FORGED THEM INTO AN ARROW AIMED AT THE HEART OF TURAN.
WHICH HAS NO HEART!
MY NAME WAS A CURSE IN THE HARBOR OF THE VILAYET SEA IN THOSE DAYS--
--AND PERHAPS IT WILL SOON BE AGAIN.
WE HAVE COMPANY, ROLF. LOOK!
AYE, THOSE YELLOW SAILS CAN MEAN BUT ONE THING--PIRATES!
WELL, WE MIGHT AS WELL DROP OUR SAIL AND AWAIT THEM. THEY COULD OVERTAKE US SWIFTLY ENOUGH AT ANY RATE.
I HOPE SOME ABOARD HAVE LONG MEMORIES, CIMMERIAN...!

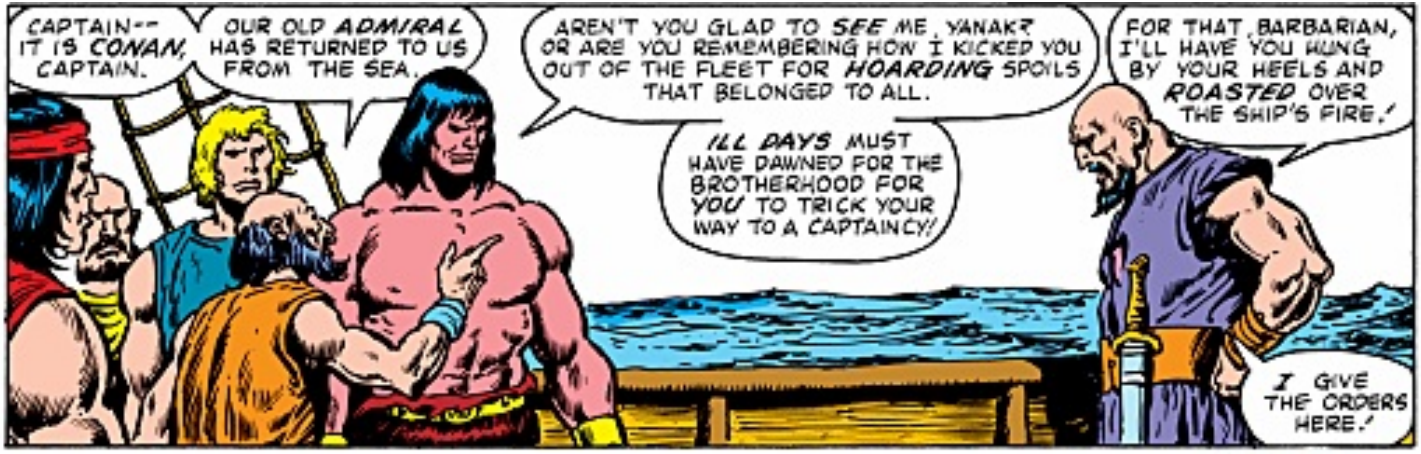
SOON THE BLACK FLAG OF THE PIRATE VESSEL FLUTTERING FROM ITS MASTHEAD, THE SLIM SAILING GALLEY HEAVES TO, ITS DECKS LINED WITH FACES...
HO, THE BROTHERHOOD!
ONE--NO, TWO--OF YOUR OWN NUMBER HAIL YOU AND CRAVE YOUR WELCOME!
AYE? AND WHAT CHOICE HAD YOU?
IF YOU'VE NO COINS ON YOU, WE'LL TOSS YOU TO THE SHARKS!

DOG -- DON'T YOU KNOW ME?
IS YOUR MEMORY SO SHORT YOU MUST BE REMINDED OF MY NAME, OR HAVE YOUR EYES GROWN DIM WITH AGE?
AN INSOLENT ONE! LET'S GUT HIM NOW AND FEED HIM PIECEMEAL TO THE FISHES!
NO-- WAIT!--

A GHOST, BY TARIM! ERLIK PRESERVE US--
--IT'S OUR OLD ADMIRAL COME BACK FROM THE GRAVE TO HAUNT US!
Y-YOU PERISHED YEARS AGO--WHEN THE COLCHIAN VAMPIRES ASSAILED YOUR CREW AND THEY FLED!
IS HE THAT ONE, OF WHOM I'VE HEARD?
*"THE ROAD OF EAGLES," SAVAGE SWORD #38-- L.J.

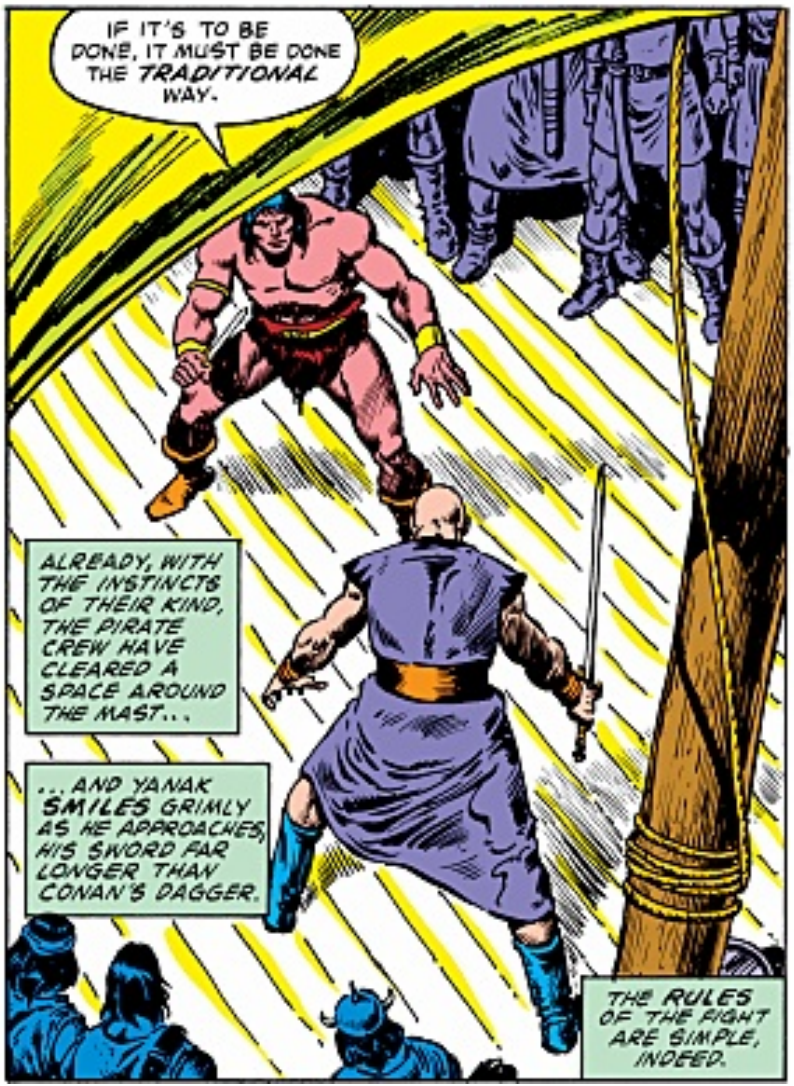
I'M AS ALIVE AS THE LOT OF YOU AND IF YOU BELIEVE ME NOT, I'LL CRACK A FEW HEADS TO PROVE IT.
I ESCAPED BOTH THE VAMPIRES AND THE TURANIANS THAT DAY. DO YOU KNOW ME NOW?
AYE, ADMIRAL, AND WE--
AVAST, THERE!

WHAT'S GOING ON? WHO ARE THESE DOGS?
I TOLD YOU TO FETCH THEM TO ME AS SOON AS THEY WERE PICKED UP, OR BY THE GODS, I'D--


CAPTAIN-- IT IS CONAN, CAPTAIN.
OUR OLD ADMIRAL HAS RETURNED TO US FROM THE SEA.
AREN'T YOU GLAD TO SEE ME, YANAK? OR ARE YOU REMEMBERING HOW I KICKED YOU OUT OF THE FLEET FOR HOARDING SPOILS THAT BELONGED TO ALL.
ILL DAYS MUST HAVE DAWNED FOR THE BROTHERHOOD FOR YOU TO TRICK YOUR WAY TO A CAPTAINCY!
FOR THAT, BARBARIAN, I'LL HAVE YOU HUNG BY YOUR HEELS AND ROASTED OVER THE SHIP'S FIRE.!
I GIVE THE ORDERS HERE.!

PERHAPS--BUT I'M STILL A MEMBER OF THE BROTHERHOOD, YANAK, AND I CLAIM MY RIGHTS...
THE RIGHT TO FIGHT THE CAPTAIN OF A SHIP FOR THE CAPTAINCY IN A CAPTAIN'S DUEL!
NOR DOES ANY CREWMAN PRESENT CHOOSE TO DENY CONAN'S ASSERTIONS.

THIS IS MADNESS, ADMIRAL.! YANAK WILL CUT YOU TO PIECES!
NO, ARTUS... THAT WOULD SPLIT THE CREW IN TWO!
ALL YOUR OLD FOLLOWERS ARE WITH YOU! WE'LL DEPOSE HIM AND--


IF IT'S TO BE DONE, IT MUST BE DONE THE TRADITIONAL WAY.
ALREADY, WITH THE INSTINCTS OF THEIR KIND, THE PIRATE CREW HAVE CLEARED A SPACE AROUND THE MAST...
...AND YANAK SMILES GRIMLY AS HE APPROACHES, HIS SWORD FAR LONGER THAN CONAN'S DAGGER.
THE RULES OF THE FIGHT ARE SIMPLE, INDEED.

THE ANTAGONISTS ARE TO FIGHT INSIDE THE CIRCLE OF MEN.
ANY TRICK IS ALLOWED.
UNNNH!
THE FIGHT IS-- TO THE DEATH!

--UNLESS ONE OF THE DUELISTS IS SO BADLY HURT HE CANNOT GO ON.
IN THAT CASE, HE WILL SIMPLY BE FLUNG OVERBOARD ANYWAY.
STAND STILL AND FIGHT, DOG!
I'LL FIGHT, ALL RIGHT, YANAK--
--BUT NOT STANDING STILL!
AAAAAA
GGKKKKGG--!
NOW, LADS--
--WHO IS CAPTAIN OF THIS TUB?

THE RESOUNDING SHOUTS WOULD SATISFY ANY DOUBTER...
CONAN! CONAN!
CONAN!

THEN TO THE SAILS AND OARS, LUBBERS -- AND A MAN TO THE MASTHEAD AS LOOKOUT!
I HAVE YEZDIGERD HIMSELF HOT ON MY TRAIL --
--BUT WE'LL LEAD HIM A MERRY CHASE, BY CROM!

SOON, THE PIRATE CRAFT SAILS SOUTHEASTWARD, HER CANVAS SPREAD BEFORE THE BREEZE, AS MEN HAUL AT LINES, VOICING LUSTY SEA SONGS...
... SO YOU THINK I'M MAD, ARTUS?
AS MITRA IS MY WITNESS, I HOPE YEZDIGERD THINKS SO, TOO!
NO, NOT MAD, CONAN. I KNOW YOU TOO WELL.
BUT, TO DASH STRAIGHT INTO THE JAWS OF THE TURANIAN THIS WAY--!

LOOK YOU, SHIPMASTER! YEZDIGERD HAS BEEN FOUR DAYS ON HIS WAY FROM AGHRAPUR... AND SHOULD BE SOMEWHERE IN THIS AREA.
WE SHOULD RENDEZVOUS WITH YEZDIGERD SOMEWHERE OFF THE ZHURAZI ARCHIPELAGO.

THE ZHURAZI, ADMIRAL? THOSE ARE DANGEROUS WATERS -- WITH NO SOUNDINGS ON THE CHARTS.
THAT CURSED CLUSTER OF ISLANDS IS SHUNNED BY MEN.
SOME SAY IT IS HAUNTED BY DEMONS AND THAT YOU ARE LOST IF YOU SET FOOT ON ITS SHORES.

LOST, HELL! I ONCE LIVED ON THE NORTH MAIN ISLAND FOR A FORTNIGHT AFTER A SHIPWRECK.
THERE WAS A TRIBE OF EASTERN SAVAGES DWELLING AMONG THE CRAGS...
...AND I HAD THE DEVIL OF A TIME STOPPING THEM FROM SACRIFICING ME TO THEIR LIZARD-GOD.

AS YOU SAY, ARTUS -- THERE ARE NO SOUNDINGS ON THIS CHART, WHICH IS THE VERY MAP OUR BLOODTHIRSTY PURSUER WILL HAVE.
THAT IS OUR ADVANTAGE, MY FRIEND!
HE DOES NOT DEIGN TO ELABORATE.

LATER, ELSEWHERE ON THE SEA OF VILAYET...
OAR-BLADES RISE AND FALL IN STEADY RHYTHM, SPEEDING THE WAR VESSELS OF KING YEZDIGERD OVER THE WAVES.
THE SLAVES OF TURANIAN SHIPS ARE ALWAYS CRUELLY DRIVEN AND NONE SO CRUELLY AS THOSE IN THE KING'S OWN FLAGSHIP, THE SCIMITAR.
I TELL YOU, WOMAN, EVIL POWERS AID THAT CIMMERIAN DEVIL!

HE MUST HAVE MANAGED TO STEAL A BOAT IMMEDIATELY UPON HIS ESCAPE, WHILE MY CURSED ADMIRALS NEED HALF A DAY TO PUT MY FLAGSHIP TO SEA.
EVEN THE WIND IS AGAINST US, SO THAT WE MUST ROW--THUS WE MOVE LIKE SNAILS!
STILL, THAT IS BETTER THAN THE BARBARIAN CAN DO, MY LORD.
HIS PUNY OARS WILL AVAIL HIM LITTLE IN THIS WIND, AND HIS HEAD START VANISHES, MOMENT BY MOMENT.
PATIENCE, MY LORD. ERLIK WILL DELIVER THE FOOL INTO OUR HANDS.

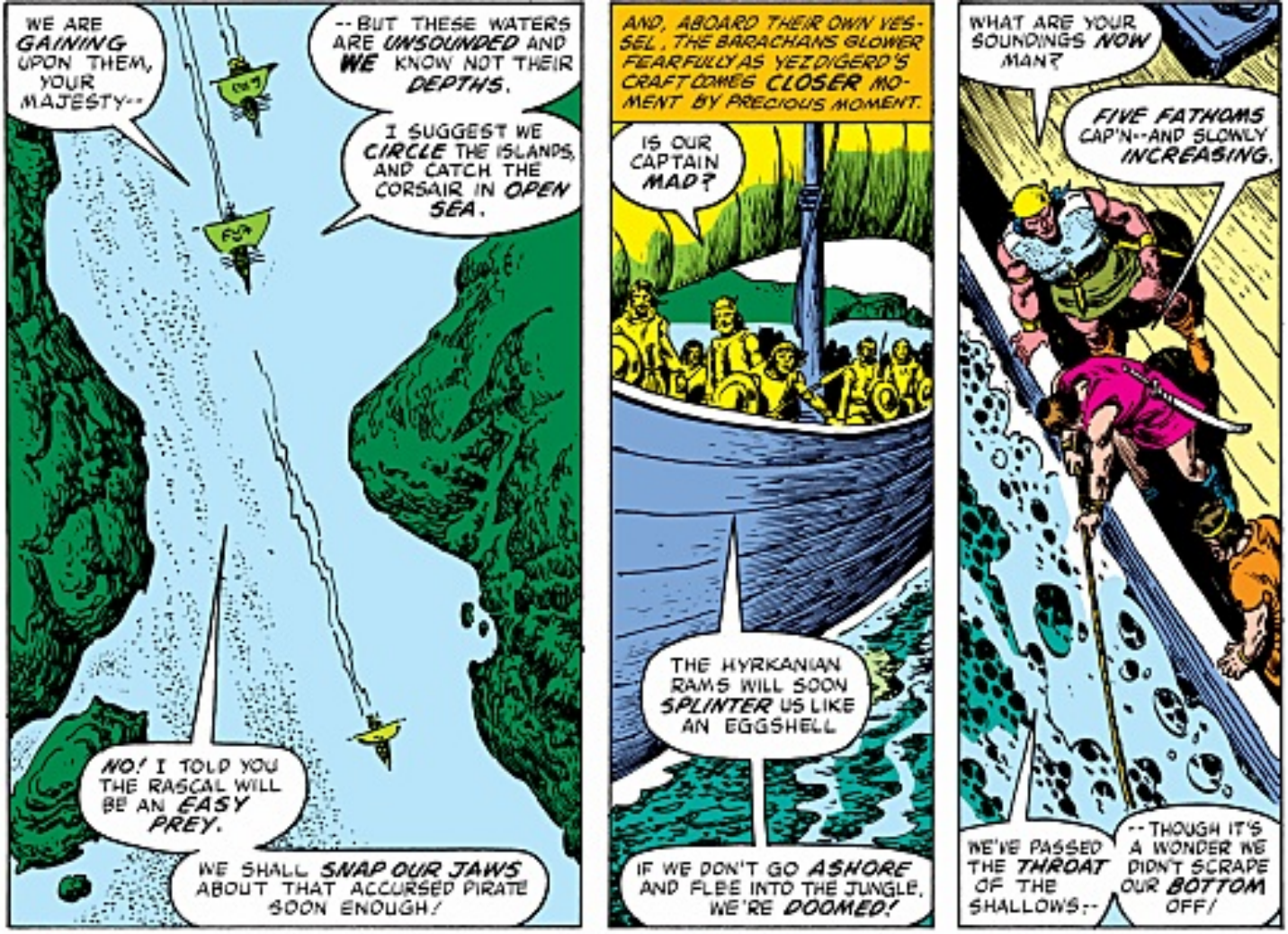
SO MY HENCHMEN HAVE OFTEN MISTAKENLY THOUGHT--WHICH IS WHY I HAVE PERSONALLY JOINED THIS FINAL EXPEDITION!
BY THE BEARD OF MY FATHER YILDIZ, WHO ONCE HAD THE DOG AS HIS PERSONAL BODYGUARD--THERE WILL BE A RECKONING!

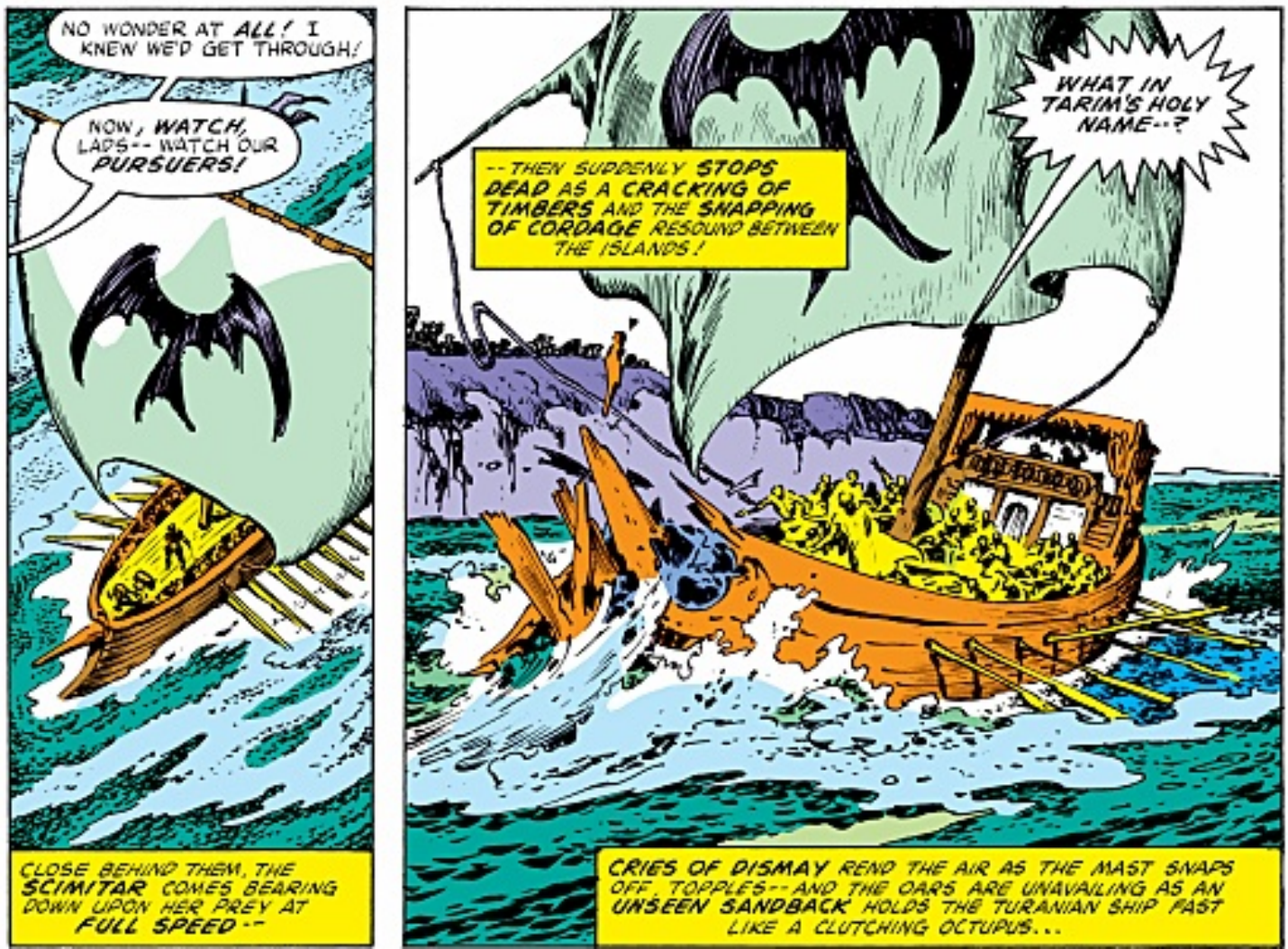
YES, MY KING... MY OWN INSTINCTS TELL ME THAT YOU ARE RIGHT.
THE SCORE BETWEEN YOU AND CONAN IS LONG... BUT SOON IT WILL BE SETTLED, ONCE AND FOR ALL.

UTHGHIZ--I SEE LAND!
HAVE WE VEERED FROM OUR COURSE?
THAT, MY LORD, IS THE ZHURAZI ARCHIPELAGO.
THESE ARE UNKNOWN WATERS BUT I INTEND TO SCAN THE COAST FOR SIGNS OF HIS BOAT, AND--

LOOK, MY LORD! YONDER IS A PRIZE FOR YOUR SHIPS!
A PIRATE! WE HAVE SURPRISED THEM!

WHILE ON THE "UNSUSPECTING" PIRATE VESSEL...
HAH! THOSE VERMIN WILL THINK US UNPREPARED -- WHEN WE ARE LONG SINCE READY FOR BATTLE, EVEN THOUGH WE'RE OUTNUMBERED!
SHALL I GIVE THE COMMAND TO ATTACK, CONAN?
NO, ROLF.
HO, LADS -- PREPARE TO GO ABOUT!
WHAT? FLEE? RUN LIKE A BUNCH OF FRIGHTENED RABBITS?
LET US ATTACK, CAP'N, AND WE'LL GIVE A GOOD ACCOUNTING OF--
I'M CAPTAIN HERE NOW, YOU MANGY RASCALS.
NOW BE SWIFT -- OR I'LL HAVE YOUR BACKS RAW UNDER THE LASH!
DO NOT WORRY, MY LUBBERS -- WE SHALL HAVE A FEASTING OF SWORDS THAT SONGS WILL BE WRITTEN ABOUT!
NOW GO TO IT!
FIRED WITH NEW ENTHUSIASM, AS WELL AS FEAR OF THEIR CAPTAIN'S WRATH, THE MEN SPRING TO THE RIGGING...
AND SOON, THE SHIP IS SPEEDING TOWARD THE INNER PARTS OF THE ARCHIPELAGO.
AS, ABOARD THE SCIMITAR...
SEE HOW THE YELLOW HYENAS FLEE!
THEY WILL LOSE THE WIND AMONG THE ISLANDS, AND THEN OUR OARS WILL MAKE THEM EASY PREY.
FASTER!
AND, BENEATH THE OVERSEER'S WHIP, THE ENSLAVED OARSMEN BEND THEIR BACKS.
MANY THERE AMONG THEM WOULD CHOOSE THE PIRATE OVER THE KING, IF THE TRUTH WERE KNOWN.
ROW, SWINE!


WE ARE GAINING UPON THEM, YOUR MAJESTY--
--BUT THESE WATERS ARE UNSOUNDED AND WE KNOW NOT THEIR DEPTHS.
I SUGGEST WE CIRCLE THE ISLANDS, AND CATCH THE CORSAIR IN OPEN SEA.
NO! I TOLD YOU THE RASCAL WILL BE AN EASY PREY.
WE SHALL SNAP OUR JAWS ABOUT THAT ACCURSED PIRATE SOON ENOUGH!
AND, ABOARD THEIR OWN VESSEL, THE BARACHANS GLOWER FEARFULLY AS YEZDIGERD'S CRAFT COMES CLOSER MOMENT BY PRECIOUS MOMENT.
IS OUR CAPTAIN MAD?
THE HYRKANIAN RAMS WILL SOON SPLINTER US LIKE AN EGGSHELL
IF WE DON'T GO ASHORE AND FLEE INTO THE JUNGLE, WE'RE DOOMED!
WHAT ARE YOUR SOUNDINGS NOW MAN?
FIVE FATHOMS CAP'N--AND SLOWLY INCREASING.
WE'VE PASSED THE THROAT OF THE SHALLOWS--
--THOUGH IT'S A WONDER WE DIDN'T SCRAPE OUR BOTTOM OFF!


NO WONDER AT ALL! I KNEW WE'D GET THROUGH!
NOW, WATCH, LADS-- WATCH OUR PURSUERS!
CLOSE BEHIND THEM, THE SCIMITAR COMES BEARING DOWN UPON HER PREY AT FULL SPEED--
WHAT IN TARIM'S HOLY NAME--?
--THEN SUDDENLY STOPS DEAD AS A CRACKING OF TIMBERS AND THE SNAPPING OF CORDAGE RESOUND BETWEEN THE ISLANDS!
CRIES OF DISMAY REND THE AIR AS THE MAST SNAPS OFF, TOPPLES--AND THE OARS ARE UNAVAILING AS AN UNSEEN SANDBACK HOLDS THE TURANIAN SHIP FAST LIKE A CLUTCHING OCTUPUS...

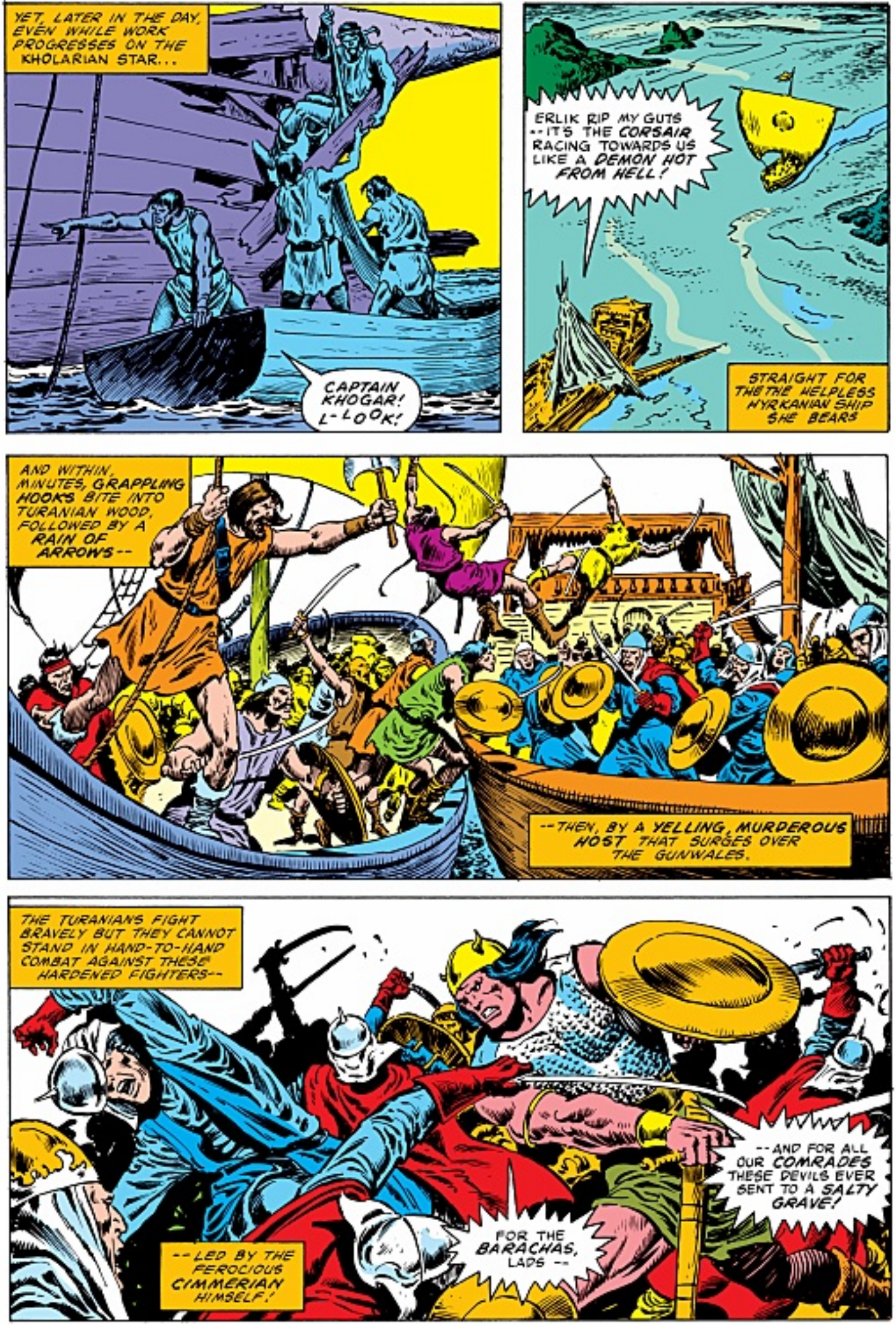
JUST BARELY, THE SECOND GALLEY AVOIDS STRIKING THE KING'S FLAGSHIP.
BUT ITS OARS ARE APPLIED UNEVENLY IN THE CONFUSION--
--AND SHE IS SAVED FROM THE CLIFFS ONLY BY ANOTHER SANDBANK INTO WHICH SHE PLOWS DEEPLY.

BY THE GODS! WE'LL BE DAYS GETTING THE CRAFT AFLOAT AGAIN!
AND SO ENDS THE PURSUIT WHICH, FOR THE TURANIANS AND THEIR DESPOT, HAD BEGUN SO HAPPILY...

HAH! WE SHOULD'VE KNOWN OUR CAPTAIN WOULD DO IT, LADS.
THE BIGGER ONE WILL DOUBTLESS NEVER SAIL AGAIN!
WHERE TO NOW, CAPTAIN? TO KHORAF PERHAPS, WHERE THE SLAVERS PUT IN,OR--?

WE HAVE TURANIAN SHIPS HERE, MY FRIENDS!
WE HAVE NOT ESCAPED YEZDIGERD --WE HAVE CAUGHT HIM IN A TRAP!
I PROMISED YOU A FEASTING OF SWORDS AND YOU SHALL HAVE IT.
THE WIND FRESHENS -- SO SET A COURSE TO ROUND THE LARBOARD ISLAND!

AND AS THE CORSAIR CREW EAGERLY COMPLY--ABOARD THE GROUNDED FLAGSHIP...
I WILL HUNT THAT DOG -- TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH!
THE WHOLE THING SMACKS OF THAT DEVIL CONAN! I'LL WARRANT HE'S ABOARD.
WILL KHOGAR NEVER GET HIS CURSED TUB AFLOAT?! FOR THIS ONE'S FINISHED!


YET, LATER IN THE DAY, EVEN WHILE WORK PROGRESSES ON THE KHOLARIAN STAR...
CAPTAIN KHOGAR! L-LOOK!
ERLIK RIP MY GUTS --IT'S THE CORSAIR RACING TOWARDS US LIKE A DEMON HOT FROM HELL!
STRAIGHT FOR THE THE HELPLESS HYRKANIAN SHIP SHE BEARS
AND WITHIN MINUTES, GRAPPLING HOOKS BITE INTO TURANIAN WOOD, FOLLOWED BY A RAIN OF ARROWS--
--THEN, BY A YELLING, MURDEROUS HOST THAT SURGES OVER THE GUNWALES.
THE TURANIANS FIGHT BRAVELY BUT THEY CANNOT STAND IN HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT AGAINST THESE HARDENED FIGHTERS--
--LED BY THE FEROCIOUS CIMMERIAN HIMSELF!
FOR THE BARACHAS, LADS --
--AND FOR ALL OUR COMRADES THESE DEVILS EVER SENT TO A SALTY GRAVE!

AAAAA
THUS, WHEN EVEN CAPTAIN KHOGAR SINKS LIFELESS TO THE BLOOD-SPATTERED DECKS..
...THE FIGHT BEGINS TO GO OUT OF THE TURANIAN SOLDIERY.

MEANWHILE, SEVERAL OF THE PIRATE CREW HAVE ALREADY DISPOSED OF THE TASKMASTER AND HELPED THEMSELVES TO HIS CLANKING KEYS.

AND, WHEN THE HATED, RUSTY FETTERS ARE REMOVED FROM THE ANKLES OF THESE SLAVES OF MANY NATIONS, MANY SHIPS--

--THE SCALES TIP FINALLY IN THE PIRATES' FAVOR.

THEN -- A MOMENT THAT HAS BEEN MORE THAN HALF A LIFETIME IN COMING...
PREPARE TO DIE, YEZDIGERD!
I SAW YOUR HAND IN THIS, CIMMERIAN CUR!
AND, BY ERLIK, NOW YOU SHALL REAP YOUR DESERTS!
PERHAPS SOME DAY I SHALL, DOG --
-- BUT NOT BY YOUR HAND!
FOR LONG MINUTES, THE TWO STRIKE AND PARRY FURIOUSLY--
-- AND PIRATES AND TURANIANS ALIKE STOP FIGHTING TO WATCH AS THE BARBARIAN-KING FORCES THE CIVILIZED MONARCH BACK, BACK.
THEN --
WELL, LADS, THAT'S A SECOND SCAR I'VE GIVEN HIM -- AND ONE THAT NO POTIONS WILL SALVE.
WITH THEIR RULER'S DEATH, THE LAST OF THE TURANIANS CEASE STRUGGLING...

BUT THE PIRATES ARE LEFT FEW PRISONERS, FOR THEIR SWORDS HAVE ALREADY TAKEN TOO HEAVY A TOLL.
A BARE HALF OF THE TWO HUNDRED PIRATES STILL STAND -- BUT THEY HAVE CAPTURED OR SLAIN THREE HUNDRED OF THE HYRKANIANS.
YET, EVEN AS PRISONERS ARE HERDED AND WOUNDS BOUND,
LOOK THERE -- THE SKY GROWS STRANGELY DARK!
AND THERE COMES A BAT -- BUT SO HUGE!
IT IS NO BAT, HOWEVER -- BUT A HUGE WINGED MAN-LIKE SHAPE --
-- WHICH SWOOPS TOWARD THE DECKS, UTTERING A SHRILL CRY THAT SMITES THE PIRATES' HEARTS LIKE DEATH.
SKREEEEEEE
AND AT THAT CRY, THE WOMAN THANARA STEPS FROM THE YET-UNMOLESTED CABIN.
IN THE WINK OF AN EYE, THE MONSTER HAS BORNE HER OFF, FLAPPING HEAVILY OVER THE OILY WATERS OF THE CHANNEL.
WITHIN SECONDS, BOTH ARE OUT OF SIGHT... AND THE SUN SHINES ONCE AGAIN.
MITRA! SH-SHE DIDN'T EVEN ACT AFRAID OF IT!
WH-WHAT WAS IT, CAPTAIN CONAN?
I HAVE SEEN THAT THING... BEFORE.
BUT HE DOES NOT DEIGN TO EXPLAIN THAT IT WAS SUCH A WINGED DEVIL THAT CARRIED OFF HIS BELOVED ZENOBIA... AND WHOSE EASTWARD PATH HE HAS FOLLOWED SINCE THAT NIGHT.
BURN THE GROUNDED GALLEY -- AND SAIL THE OTHER, WITH HALF THE CREW, BACK TO THE BARACHAN ISLES!

HIS OLD SCORE WITH YEZDIGERD SETTLED AT LAST FOR ALL TIME, CONAN CONFERS FOR HOURS WITH ONE OF THE FREED SLAVES--A **KHITAN**, WITH WHOM HE TALKS OF FAR LANDS **BEYOND THE HIMELIAN MOUNTAINS.**

THEN, THE BIGGEST SURPRISE OF ALL :

ROLF, **YOU** ARE CAPTAIN, NOW, AND I DOUBT THAT ANY MAN WILL CHALLENGE YOUR RIGHT.

BUT--WHERE DO **YOU** GO, CONAN?

TO THE **EAST!**

HE WILL SAY NO MORE.

Weeks later, in distant Vendhya:

WEARING THE GUISE OF THE HIGH CASTE **KSHATRIYANS**, CONAN OF CIMMERIA STRIDES THROUGH THE STREETS OF THE GREAT **SUB-CONTINENT** NEXT DOOR TO THE SPRAWLING **KHITAI**...

...AND INTO A NEARLY-EMPTY TAVERN, FOR SCENTED SHIRAKAM WINE... AND A FEW ANSWERS...

HOW FARES HER ROYAL HIGHNESS, THE **DEVI YASMINA**

AH, THE DEVI RULES, AS EVER WITH A WISE AND FIRM HAND...

...EVEN THOUGH SHE HAS **NO CONSORT** TO STAND BY HER SIDE AND UPHOLD HER.

BUT THE **NOBILITY** SAY THAT THE THRONE NEEDS A MORE **WAR-LIKE** SPIRIT...

...AND IT'S EVEN WHISPERED THAT HER COUSIN, **CHENGIR KHAN**, HAS AN EYE BOTH FOR HER AND FOR HER THRONE.

AND HOW DOES **SHE** FEEL ABOUT IT?

I KNOW ONLY **RUMORS**, OF COURSE, BEING BUT A POOR TAVERNER...

...BUT IT'S RUMORED THAT, THOUGH SHE'S REPULSED HIS WOOING SO FAR, SHE SOON WILL BE **FORCED** TO ACCEPT HIM.

THE DYNASTY MUST BE CARRIED ON... AND YASMINA MUST DO HER **DUTY** TO THE REALM.

I'M **SURE** SHE WILL, BARKEEP.

NOW, HAVE YOU A **ROOM** FOR THE NIGHT?

THESE DESERT TRIPS TAKE THE **SAP** OUT OF A MAN.

LATER, AS THE EASTERN NIGHT LIES LIKE A HOT, CARESSING SILKEN BLANKET ON THE CITY OF AYODHYA, CONAN SLEEPS...
...THOUGH NOT, AS IT TURNS OUT...
... FOR LONG.
UNNNHH-!
ALL RIGHT, YOU--
WHY ARE YOU HERE IN MY ROOM?
TALK, YOU-- BUT HUSH YOUR VOICE!
I--I CAME TO FETCH YOU FOR MY MISTRESS...
SHE HAS LEARNED OF YOUR COMING, AND IS ANXIOUS TO SEE YOU.
NOT SO FAST, WENCH...!
DON YOUR CLOTHES AND WE WILL BE ON OUR WAY. H-HURRY, I BEG YOU.!

WHO IS YOUR MISTRESS? AND WHY DOES SHE SEND YOU TO ME LIKE A SKULKING THIEF?
I--I DARE NOT SAY WHO SHE IS, BUT SHE BADE ME SAY THIS...
"THE GALZAI GIRL OF MOUNT YISHMA WOULD REPAY CONAN OF GHOR FOR THE CLOTHES HE ONCE GAVE HER!"
WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY THAT IN THE FIRST PLACE, GIRL!
LET'S GO!
"MOUNT YISHMA," THE MESSENGER MAIDEN HAS SAID--AND SET THE CIMMERIAN'S PULSE RACING...
...AS HIS THOUGHTS WANDER BACK THIRTEEN YEARS, TO THE MOMENTOUS DAYS WHEN HE ASSAULTED THE EVIL WIZARDS OF THE BLACK CIRCLE, AS THE WAR-CHIEF OF THE HILL-MEN...
...AND TO HOW HE ONCE ACQUIRED SOME GARMENTS FROM A GALAZAI HILL-GIRL...
...FOR YASMINA, DEVI OF MIGHTY VENDHYA!
SO YOUR MISTRESS IS THE DEVI HERSELF, EH?
AYE, MY LORD...
THAT IS WHY WE TOOK SUCH A DEVIOUS ROUTE HERE, FOR MY MISTRESS HAS ENEMIES.
NOW, I BUT PRESS TWO PLACES IN THIS SECTION OF THE PALACE WALL AT THE SAME TIME...
...AND I SHALL TAKE YOU TO HER.
IMPRESSIVE! BUT WHY DIDN'T THE DEVI HAVE ME COME IN THE FRONT WAY?
BECAUSE YOU, CONAN OF GHOR, HAVE EVEN MORE FOES IN VENDHYA THAN SHE.
SHE SAID SHE DID NOT WISH TO SEE YOU TORN IN TWAIN BETWEEN WILD ELEPHANTS.
YOUR MISTRESS HAS A POINT.

THROUGH DIM-LIT CORRIDORS, THEY GLIDE, TWO GHOSTS IN THE NIGHT...
...TILL AT LAST THE GIRL STOPS AND PEERS THROUGH A SMALL HOLE SET AT EYE'S HEIGHT.
SHE PULLS A HIDDEN LEVER, AND THE DOOR OPENS.

WAIT HERE, MY LORD... AND I WILL TELL MY MISTRESS THAT YOU ARE HERE.
YET AS THE GIRL LEAVES THE ROOM, CONAN GROWS APPREHENSIVE... AND KEEPS HIS HAND NEAR HIS SWORD.

THIS IS A HIGH LADY'S CHAMBER, WITHOUT DOUBT, FROM ITS TRAPPINGS.
BUT, SUCH HAVE BEEN USED AS A TRAP ERE NOW! AND WILL AGAIN.

THEN A SOUND AT HIS BACK MAKES HIM WHEEL...
MY HILL CHIEFTAIN--

--YOU'VE COME BACK!
YASMINA!

YOUR WENCH SAID--
LATER, MY CHIEFTAIN-- NOT NOW!
I HAVE SENT AWAY THE GUARDS FOR THE NIGHT, AND THE ENTRANCE TO THIS ROOM IS LOCKED.
LOVE ME, CONAN--!

FOR THIRTEEN YEARS, I HAVE LONGED FOR THE FEEL OF YOUR ARMS AROUND ME-- NOR HAVE I BEEN HAPPY A SINGLE MOMENT SINCE WE PARTED AFTER THE BATTLE IN FEMESH VALLEY.
HOLD ME IN YOUR ARMS--AND LET THIS BE A NIGHT THAT NEITHER OF US SHALL EVER FORGET!
AND IT IS.

LATER, THE FAINT LIGHT OF THE STARS SIFTS INTO THE QUEEN'S BEDCHAMBER, AS CONAN AWAKES FOR THE SECOND TIME THIS NIGHT--
--AND FOR THE SAME REASON...
SOUNDS! STEALTHILY APPROACHING SOUNDS!
INSTANTLY WIDE AWAKE, HE IS GLAD HE KEEPS HIS SWORD NEAR HIM AT ALL TIMES, EVEN ASLEEP
NOR DOES IT TAKE THE GLINT OF STEEL TO TELL THE CIMMERIAN THAT HERE IS A DEADLY DANGER...
FOR, MASKED MEN DO NOT NIGHTLY INVADE THEIR QUEEN'S CHAMBER WITH KINDLY INTENTIONS.
EVEN AS HE BRACES HIMSELF FOR THE SIX TO ATTACK, CONAN CAN GUESS WHAT HAS PRECEDED THIS SKULKING ASSAULT!
THE DEVI IS SEEN AS WEAKENING THE COUNTRY BY HER PEACEFUL RULE...
...AND MEN WITH WARLIKE AMBITIONS CANNOT BE MOLLIFIED BY BUILDING DAMS AND ESTABLISHING ROADS.
WELL, IF IT'S BLOOD THEY WANT THIS NIGHT--
--IT'S BLOOD THEY SHALL HAVE--
EYES OF ASURA!
URRGK!
--BUT NOT THE BLOOD OF THE DEVI YASMINA!

MURDER A WOMAN SLEEPING IN HER BED, WILL YOU, CURS!
AAAAA
COWARDS! JACKALS! ANY TREACHEROUS STYGIAN IS A FAIR FIGHTER COMPARED TO YOU!
HERE, DOG! YOU WANTED A CORPSE, DIDN'T YOU?
MMMFF!
WHO ARE YOU? JOIN US IN OUR CAUSE, OR--
THE VENDHYAN'S NOBLY-ACCENTED WORDS NEVER COMPLETE THEIR SENTENCE AS CONAN'S SWORD SWEEPS THE ROOM LIKE A SCYTHE--
AIEEE
--TILL THE FIFTH OF THE MASKED WOULD-BE ASSASINS FALLS TO THE FLOOR CHOKING ON HIS OWN GORE.
URRGG
ONLY THE ONE INTO WHOM HE SLAMMED THE CORPSE REMAINS ALIVE NOW--AND HE WOULD MEET HIS FATE IN AN INSTANT--
--BUT FOR A SMEAR OF SLIPPERY CRIMSON!
WHAT?
THE LAST OF THE VENDHYAN ASSASSINS SPRINGS FORWARD, AN UNHOLY GLEAM IN HIS DARK EYES--HIS CURVED SWORD RAISED ABOVE THE FELLED CIMMERIAN--
YOU'LL NEVER RISE AGAIN, YOU NAMELESS DOG!

THEN, LIKE A DART FROM THE HAND OF A WATCHING GOD...
GGAAAA
YASMINA!
LUCKY FOR ME YOU WERE QUICK WITH YOUR STICKER, GIRL-- AND ACCURATE, TOO!
I'VE NOT FORGOTTEN MY DAYS WITH YOU IN THE HILLS, CONAN.
BUT LET'S SEE WHO--!
CHENGIR--MY OWN COUSIN! I SHOULD HAVE GUESSED, BUT--
OH, BLACK TREACHERY, AND MADNESS FOR POWER! HEADS SHALL ROLL FOR THIS TOMORROW!
OH, CONAN--I KNOW NOW THAT I NEED A CONSORT!
YOU...DO ME A GREAT HONOR LASS.
RULE VENDHYA, WITH ME! TOMORROW WE'LL ANNOUNCE OUR BETROTHAL AND--
BUT I GUESS I FORGOT TO MENTION, IN ALL THE EXCITEMENT...
I'M ALREADY MARRIED... AND SEARCHING FOR MY CAPTURED QUEEN!
TOMORROW, I MUST RIDE FOR THE HIMELIAN MOUNTAINS.
SO BE IT! TOMORROW, THEN ... YOU GO!
BUT...IT IS STILL MANY HOURS ...TILL DAWN...!
... BUT JUDGE NOT YOUR FATHER TOO HARSHLY, YOUNG PRINCE.
HE LOVES YOUR MOTHER...LOVES HER STILL...
YET HE IS, AFTER ALL ...A MAN.
AND CONN, WITHIN HIS VERY YOUNG HEART WHICH IS STILL YEARS FROM UNDERSTANDING, DOES FORGIVE.
IT IS CONAN, RATHER WHO HAS NEVER QUITE FORGIVEN HIMSELF...
... THOUGH YASMINA, CROM BLESS HER, WAS EVER QUITE A WOMAN....!
NEXT: A QUEEN RECLAIMED!
THE SOUL-SEARCHING CONCLUSION OF CONAN THE AVENGER!

KING CONAN

c/o MARVEL COMICS GROUP
575 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022

LOUISE JONES
EDITOR
DANNY FINGEROTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear barbarian bookpeople:

First off, I have to say I enjoy everything you people put out concerning Conan. I have just recently read KING CONAN #5, and the art was fantastic!

But what about the story? Nothing short of great! For some reason, I never did read all the Conan paperbacks, even though CONAN THE CONQUEROR got me hooked way back in high school. But thanks to the wonderful world of Marvel Comics, I'm able to follow the saga fully in graphic format, and I think it's neat. Never before has such a comprehensive comic-book cataloging of a literary canon been attempted. When you first started, years ago, I was skeptical, thinking the original CONAN THE BARBARIAN title would never last long enough to adapt and extrapolate all the Cimmerian's adventures.

Now, well, what can I say? Looks like you've got it under control. Keep those cards and KING CONANs coming!

Sturgil Smith
Elizabeth, NJ 07650

Dear Louise:

"The Ring of Rakhamon" (based on CONAN THE AVENGER) in ish #5 was very good — especially the cover. John Buscema and Ernie Chan are a great team.

I want to wish whoever takes over as the new writer for KING CONAN all the luck in the world. You have a solid groundwork, and I look forward to many good stories to come.

I wasn't crazy about the fact that Zenobia is playing the helpless wife bit. Relias was a welcome change from all the crazy wizards. And Yah Chieng, I hope, will turn out to be one of Conan's deadliest foes.

I sure hope KING CONAN goes monthly soon.

Charles David Haskell
15 W 139 Street — Apt 4R
New York, NY 10037

Not so fast, fella! We've been getting polite requests, wiley wheedlings, canny cajolings, and sundry threats — all to induce us to up the frequency with which we publish KING CONAN. We're flat-out flattered, because not long ago, they said it couldn't be done — said that the world wasn't big enough for three mighty Marvel Conan mags. And now, all Aquilonia-dom Assembled is clamoring for more of KING CONAN. Who knows — maybe we'll even manage to do it — someday. But, in the meanwhile, what the hey! There's more Conan material being published than there ever has been, so sit back and enjoy it, okay? Okay!

Dear Louise:

Old King Conan was a merry olde soul,
A merry olde soul was he,
Not much of a thinker,
But one heck of a drinker,
Fighting his way through barbarian hordes,
All for a king's room and board,
Olde King Conan was more than a man,
He was a mighty warlord!

Tony Powers
St. Michael
North Dakota 58370

**Your poem, Mr. Powers,
Above all others towers,
It makes us grin from ear to ear,
And give a mighty Hyborean cheer!**

Dear Louise:

Mood! Mood is what comics storytelling is all about. At least, that's the way I felt about KING CONAN #5. The first panel on page two really captured a sense of night quiet and still depth. The art is almost poetry. That goes for a good many of the half-page shots used to set place and time.

Also, whether you realize it or not, Conan is a unique character in comicsdom. Here you have three different comics-type mags all devoted to the same character — but in different stages of his individual development. There's Conan later in life, as king, with a sense of history behind him. There's Conan during his earlier days, during his era on the high seas, and so on. He lives, he breathes, he changes. And not only that, but we get to see him at different times of his life all at the same time, by buying the various different Conan mags.

Oops. Guess I got a bit astray from the issue in question — KING CONAN #5, that is. When Conan rides into Khamria, wearing a turban and robe, I couldn't help but be reminded of Roger Moore as James Bond in THE SPY WHO LOVED ME, pulling a similar stunt. But, whereas it was utterly out of character for James Bond to ever have done such a thing, it is extraordinarily in character for Conan. Gods! To live in such a world, such a time as does Conan — with action and adventure and intrigue at every corner, beautiful women and roguish men, and always a treasure just beyond reach!

A minor criticism: I must say, the smack in the nose at the top of page 19 looked silly. And panel two on page 23 definitely hurt Conan's dignity. I know the intent was to portray his barbarianism, but the actual result was to make him look like the Hulk.

One big difference between the comics adaptation of CONAN THE AVENGER and the paperback novel original, is that the book is largely text, pulp writing and descriptions — while, by the nature of the medium, the comic is mostly dialogue, which is a vastly preferable way to tell a story — much more immediate and entertaining and revealing. And KING CONAN is a real treat when it comes to sheer length of story, too, allowing one to "get lost" in the story. But I wish you'd quit with the portfiio filler material in the back. Enough, already. The art may be nice, but think how much better it would be were it accompanied by *story!*

That's all for now. Hope you can take the good comments with the bad. Keep KING CONAN comin'!

Norton Triumph
#6 Villiers Square
San Pedro, CA

We will, Norton — just you stick around and see! As for your wanting to live at the time of Conan, sure there was lots of excitement and adventure then — but only for those willing to risk life and limb in pursuit of it. In that respect our modern world really isn't all that different. Most people — then and now — seem to choose the humdrum routine of a secure way of life in exchange for the knowledge they will indeed be alive to live each day. What attracts us to Conan is his ability to say "No!" to a dull but secure day-to-day existence and experience the drama — and the danger — of life to its fullest. It's that quality that makes *us* want to continue chronicling his adventures and — hopefully — keeps you buying 'em. And that, students, concludes today's session of Philosophy 101.

Dear Marvel:

— Only Marvel could credit Danny Bulanadi with Ernie Chan's inking of KING CONAN #5.

— Only Marvel could spell Ghandar Chen's name two different ways in a two-page span.

— Only Marvel could color Red Sonja's hair blonde, and give her enough chain-mail to look like Captain America.

— Only Marvel could fail to give this mag's letters column a title, even though it's been around for a full year.

— Only Marvel could fail to give us a letters page in the latest issue, even though it's published on a quarterly basis.

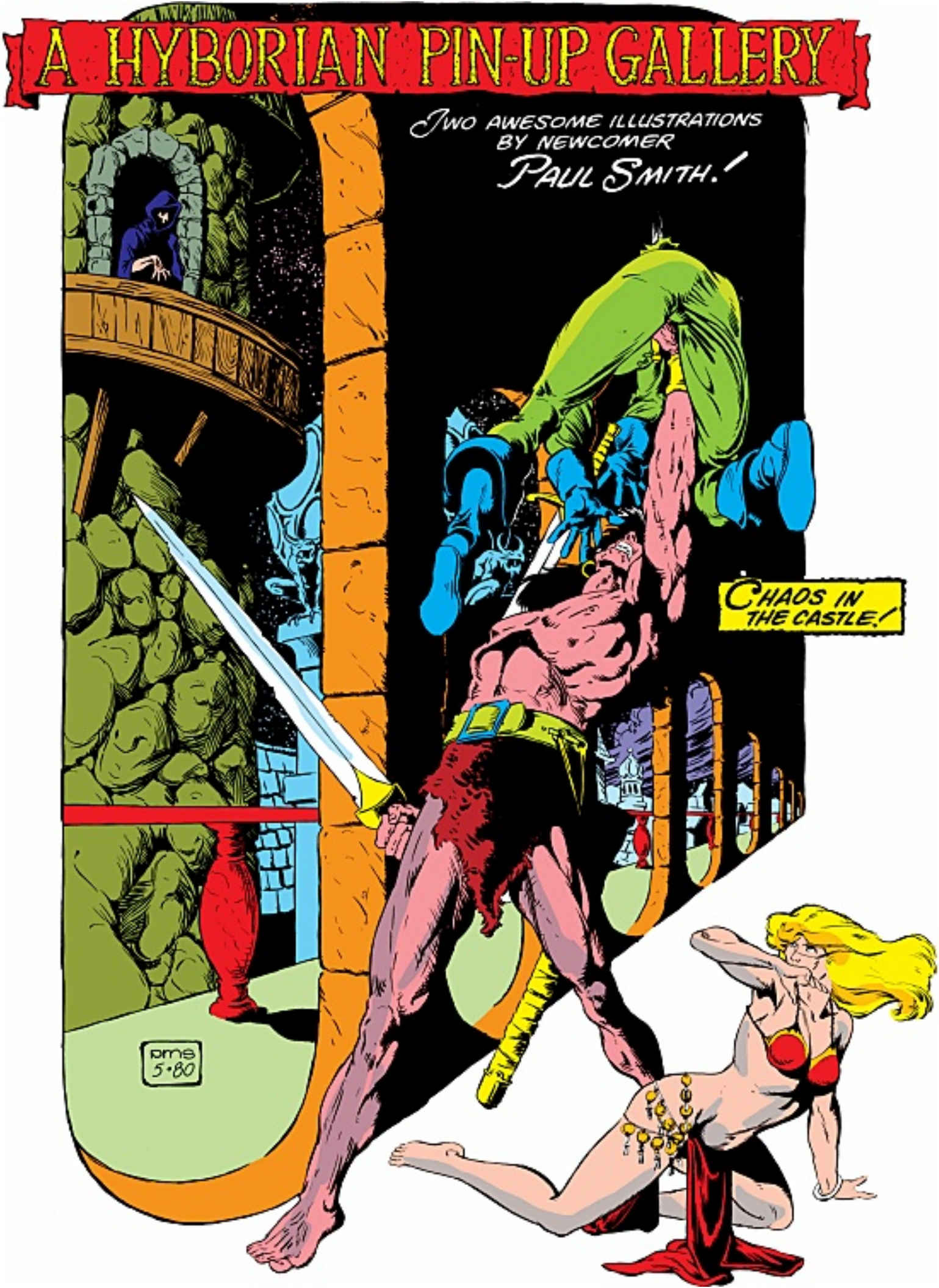
— Only Marvel could do all this, and still keep me around as an avid fan, collector, and all-around, bonafide worshipper of your magnificent Conan magazines. I would like to say keep up the good work, but somehow that doesn't make sense!

David C. Zimmerman
157 Lemay Gardens Ct
St. Louis, MO 63125

And only Marvel could have the nerve to say: *'Nuff said!*

STAN LEE PRESENTS: A HYBORIAN PIN-UP GALLERY
THE BARBARIAN AS DRAGON SLAYER!
...NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH THE MOVIE OR THE MARVEL COMIC OF THE SAME NAME!

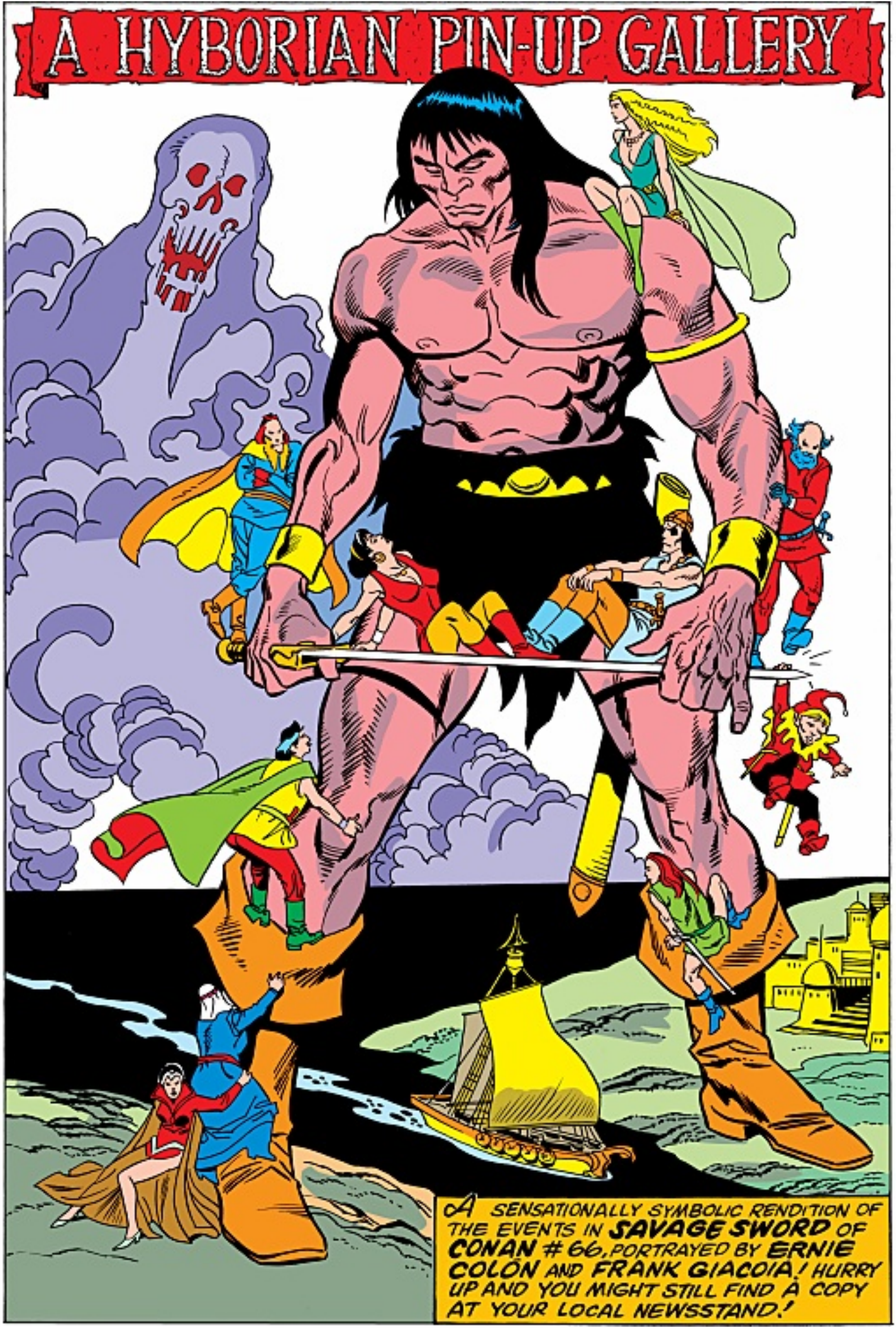
A HYBORIAN PIN-UP GALLERY



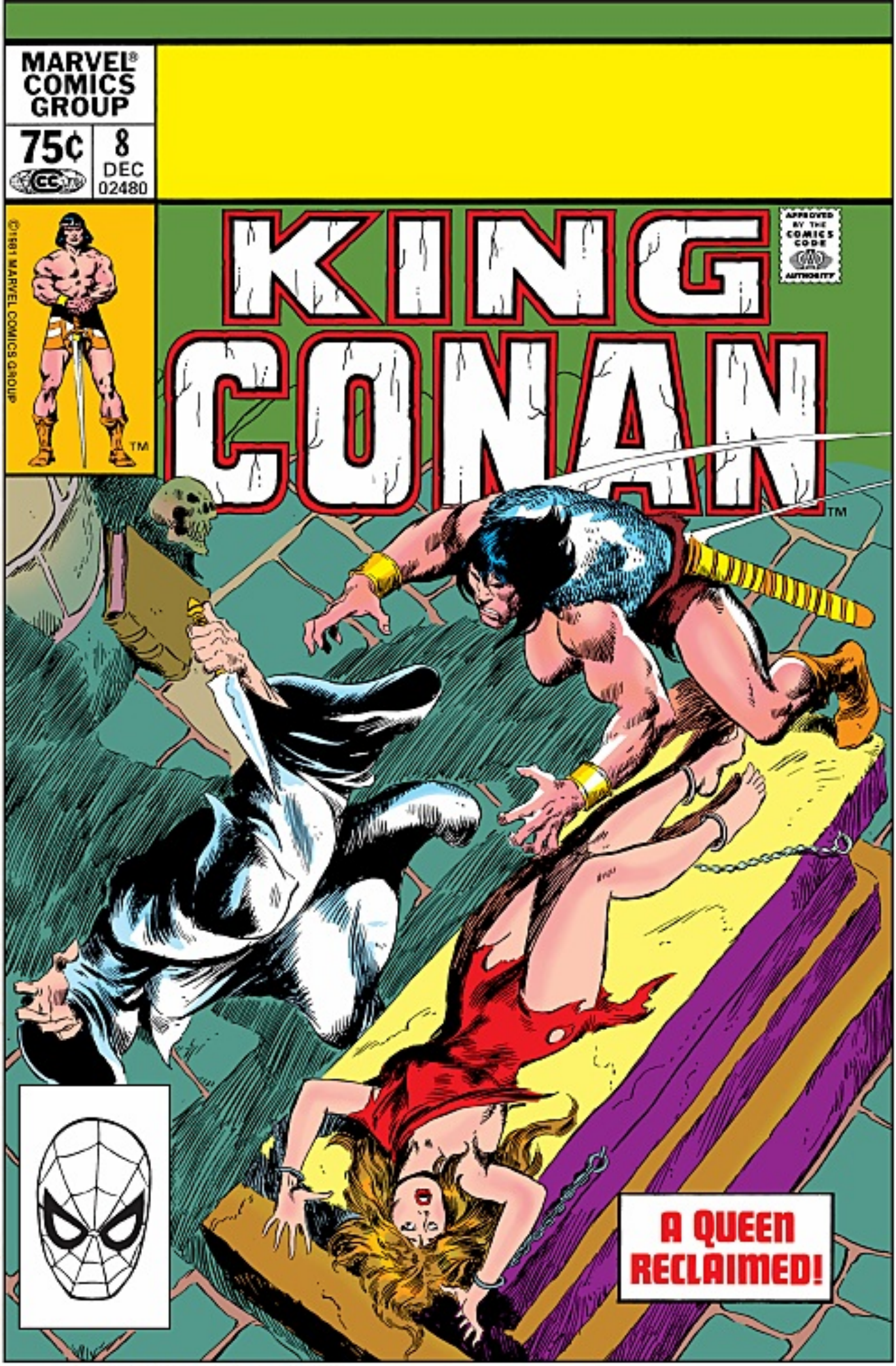
A HYBORIAN PIN-UP GALLERY

the FROST GIANT'S DAUGHTER

A HYBORIAN PIN-UP GALLERY



A SENSATIONALLY SYMBOLIC RENDITION OF THE EVENTS IN **SAVAGE SWORD** OF **CONAN** #66, PORTRAYED BY **ERNIE COLÓN** AND **FRANK GIACOIA**! HURRY UP AND YOU MIGHT STILL FIND A COPY AT YOUR LOCAL NEWSSTAND!



COVER PENCILER & INKER: JOHN BUSCEMA

Stan Lee PRESENTS:
KING CONAN
Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD
South of Tarantia:
SO YOU WOULD HEAR THE CONCLUSION OF MY TALE, EH, PRINCE CONN--
-- MY TALE OF HOW YOUR FATHER RESCUED YOUR MOTHER, THE QUEEN, FROM HER EASTERN ABDUCTORS?
MORE THAN ANYTHING, COUNT TROCERO!
HERE'S THE WAY IT ALL CAME OUT, THEN, BACK IN THOSE YEARS BEFORE YOU WERE BORN...
HAVING SAVED THE DEVI YASMINA'S THRONE A SECOND TIME, CONAN CONTINUES EASTWARD TILL HE REACHES THE TOWERING SNOW-CAPPED HIMELIAN MOUNTAINS...
BY THUNDER, IT IS GOOD TO BE AMONG HILLMEN AGAIN!
WE OF THE KHIRGULI TRIBE ARE HONORED BY YOUR PRESENCE, CONAN OF CIMMERIA...
AYE, THE MORE SO, SINCE YOU TOLD US HOW YOU SLEW KING YEZDIGERD, LORD OF THE TURANIANS!
IN TRUTH, I ALMOST WISH IT WAS TURANIANS -- AYE, OR VENDHYANS -- WHO WERE OUR GREATEST WORRY!
WHAT DOES YONDER WHISPERER MEAN, CHIEFTAIN?
IT IS SAID THAT THE SNOW DEMONS OF THE OLD MYTHS ARE ABROAD AGAIN, ALAS!
TAKE OUR ADVICE, OLD FRIEND!
TAKE THE LONG WAY AROUND THE TALAKMAN REGION, IF YOU CAN!
I THANK YOU FOR THE WARNING, HILLMEN -- BUT THAT WOULD COST ME TWO MONTHS.
I MUST TRAVEL THE STRAIGHTEST PATH, FOR MY TIME IS SHORT.
BUT TELL ME MORE OF THESE SO-CALLED "SNOW DEMONS"....!

A QUEEN RECLAIMED!

THE EPIC CONCLUSION OF OUR ADAPTATION OF
CONAN THE AVENGER BY L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP
AND BJÖRN NYBERG

ROY THOMAS
WRITER

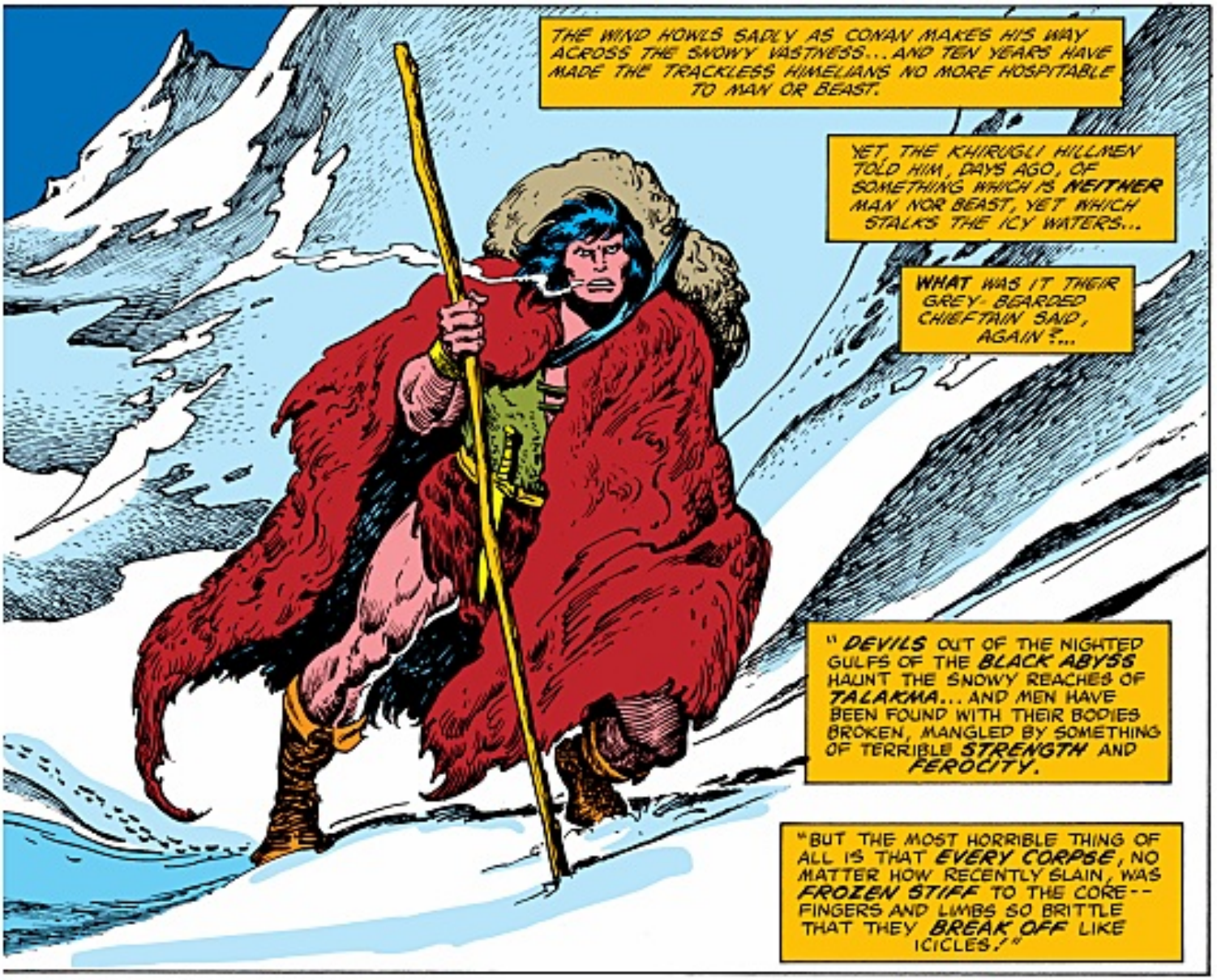
JOHN BUSCEMA & ERNIE CHAN
ILLUSTRATORS
JANICE CHIANG - LETTERER
GEORGE ROUSSOS - COLORIST
LOUISE JONES - EDITOR
JIM SHOOTER - EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

FEATURING THE HERO CREATED BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

YET LADEN WITH SUPPLIES, HE HAS SEEN **NOTHING** THESE DAYS PAST, AS HE TRAVERSED THE SNOWS WITH THE EASY LONG-LIMBED **HILLMAN'S STRIDE** THAT EATS UP THE MOUNTAINOUS MILES.

AT NIGHT, HE SLEEPS IN PRIMITIVE **SNOW CAVES** DUG WITH HIS OWN CRUDE SHOVEL...

AND IN DARKNESS AS IN THE BLINDING LIGHT OF DAY, HE HEARS AND SEES ... **NOTHING.**


THE WIND HOWLS SADLY AS CONAN MAKES HIS WAY ACROSS THE SNOWY VASTNESS... AND TEN YEARS HAVE MADE THE TRACKLESS HIMELIANS NO MORE HOSPITABLE TO MAN OR BEAST.
YET, THE KHIRUGLI HILLMEN TOLD HIM, DAYS AGO, OF SOMETHING WHICH IS NEITHER MAN NOR BEAST, YET WHICH STALKS THE ICY WATERS...
WHAT WAS IT THEIR GREY-BEARDED CHIEFTAIN SAID, AGAIN?...
"DEVILS OUT OF THE NIGHTED GULFS OF THE BLACK ABYSS HAUNT THE SNOWY REACHES OF TALAKMA... AND MEN HAVE BEEN FOUND WITH THEIR BODIES BROKEN, MANGLED BY SOMETHING OF TERRIBLE STRENGTH AND FEROCITY.
"BUT THE MOST HORRIBLE THING OF ALL IS THAT EVERY CORPSE, NO MATTER HOW RECENTLY SLAIN, WAS FROZEN STIFF TO THE CORE-- FINGERS AND LIMBS SO BRITTLE THAT THEY BREAK OFF LIKE ICICLES!"

INDEED, PERHAPS IT IS THE VERY FACT THAT THE SNOWS SEEM UNBROKEN, ALMOST DEVOID OF LIVING THINGS, THAT MAKES HIM CARELESS.
AND IN THE HIMELIANS, ONE IS RARELY CARELESS...

... TWICE!
HRARRR

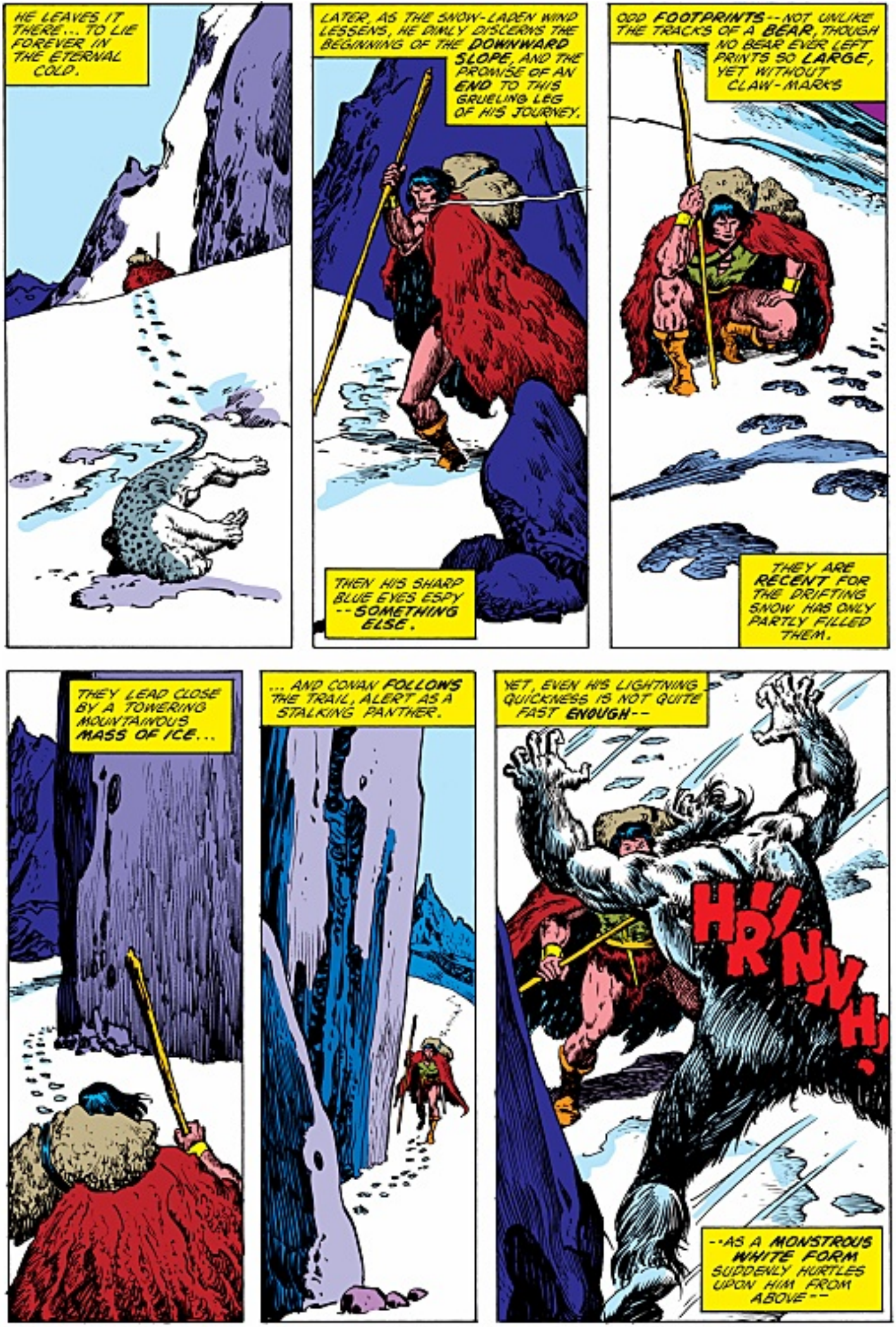
IT HAS BEEN, THEY SAY, A BAD WINTER, IN THIS PART OF THE MOUNTAINS... ELSE, THE SNOW LEOPARD WOULD NEVER HAVE ATTACKED A FULL-GROWN MAN.
GRRL

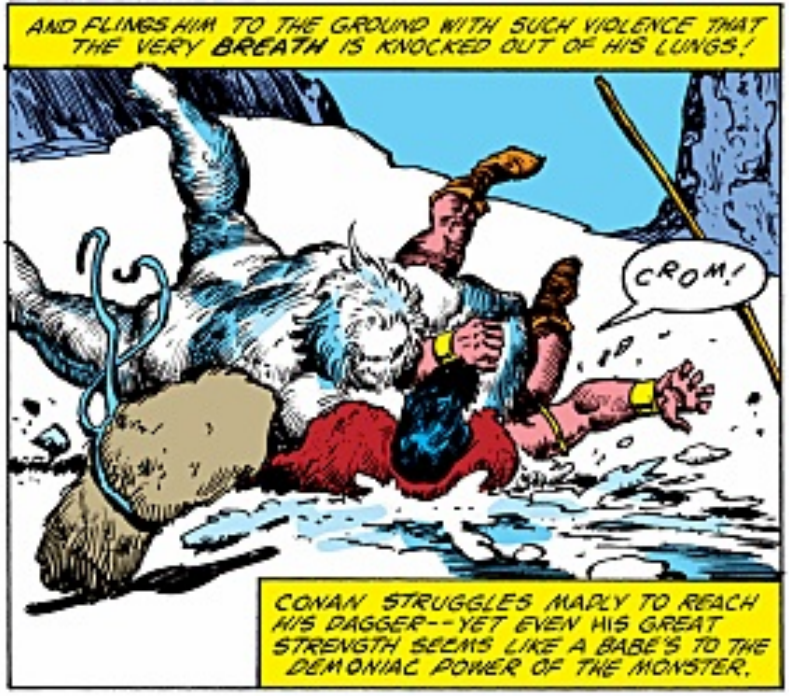
IN ANY EVENT, IT HAS PICKED THE WRONG MAN.

CONAN'S HEAVY FUR CLOAK HAS PROTECTED HIM INITIALLY, FROM THE BIG CAT'S THIRSTING FANGS...
SNARRL

AND NOW, WITH A RIPPING THRUST OF HIS LONG DAGGER--

--HE FORCES THE ANIMAL TO THE GROUND, CHOKING OUT ITS LIFE IN HARSH CONVULSIONS.
GRARRGG


HE LEAVES IT THERE... TO LIE FOREVER IN THE ETERNAL COLD.
LATER, AS THE SNOW-LADEN WIND LESSENS, HE DIMLY DISCERNS THE BEGINNING OF THE DOWNWARD SLOPE, AND THE PROMISE OF AN END TO THIS GRUELING LEG OF HIS JOURNEY.
THEN HIS SHARP BLUE EYES ESPY --SOMETHING ELSE.
ODD FOOTPRINTS--NOT UNLIKE THE TRACKS OF A BEAR, THOUGH NO BEAR EVER LEFT PRINTS SO LARGE, YET WITHOUT CLAW-MARKS
THEY ARE RECENT FOR THE DRIFTING SNOW HAS ONLY PARTLY FILLED THEM.
THEY LEAD CLOSE BY A TOWERING MOUNTAINOUS MASS OF ICE...
... AND CONAN FOLLOWS THE TRAIL, ALERT AS A STALKING PANTHER.
YET, EVEN HIS LIGHTNING QUICKNESS IS NOT QUITE FAST ENOUGH--
HRRNNH!
--AS A MONSTROUS WHITE FORM SUDDENLY HURTLES UPON HIM FROM ABOVE--


AND FLINGS HIM TO THE GROUND WITH SUCH VIOLENCE THAT THE VERY BREATH IS KNOCKED OUT OF HIS LUNGS!
CROM!
CONAN STRUGGLES MADLY TO REACH HIS DAGGER--YET EVEN HIS GREAT STRENGTH SEEMS LIKE A BABE'S TO THE DEMONIAC POWER OF THE MONSTER.

AND THEN, A HORRIBLE FEATURELESS FACE BENDS FORWARD--AS IF TO STARE STRAIGHT INTO HIS EYES --

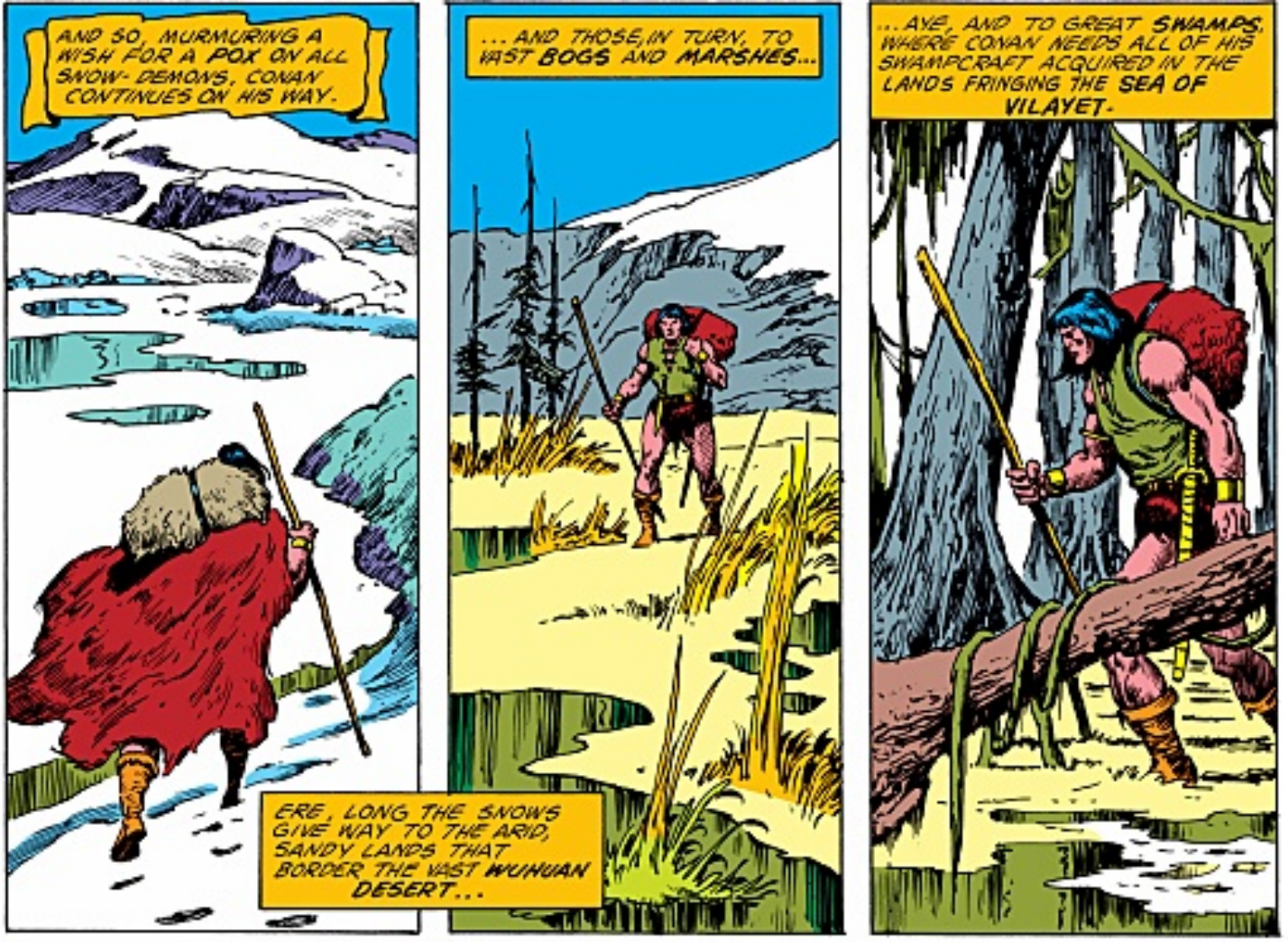
--AND AN ABYSMAL CHILL BEGINS TO ENVELOP HIS BODY--AS HE FEELS A DEADLY TUGGING AT THE BORDERS OF HIS MIND...

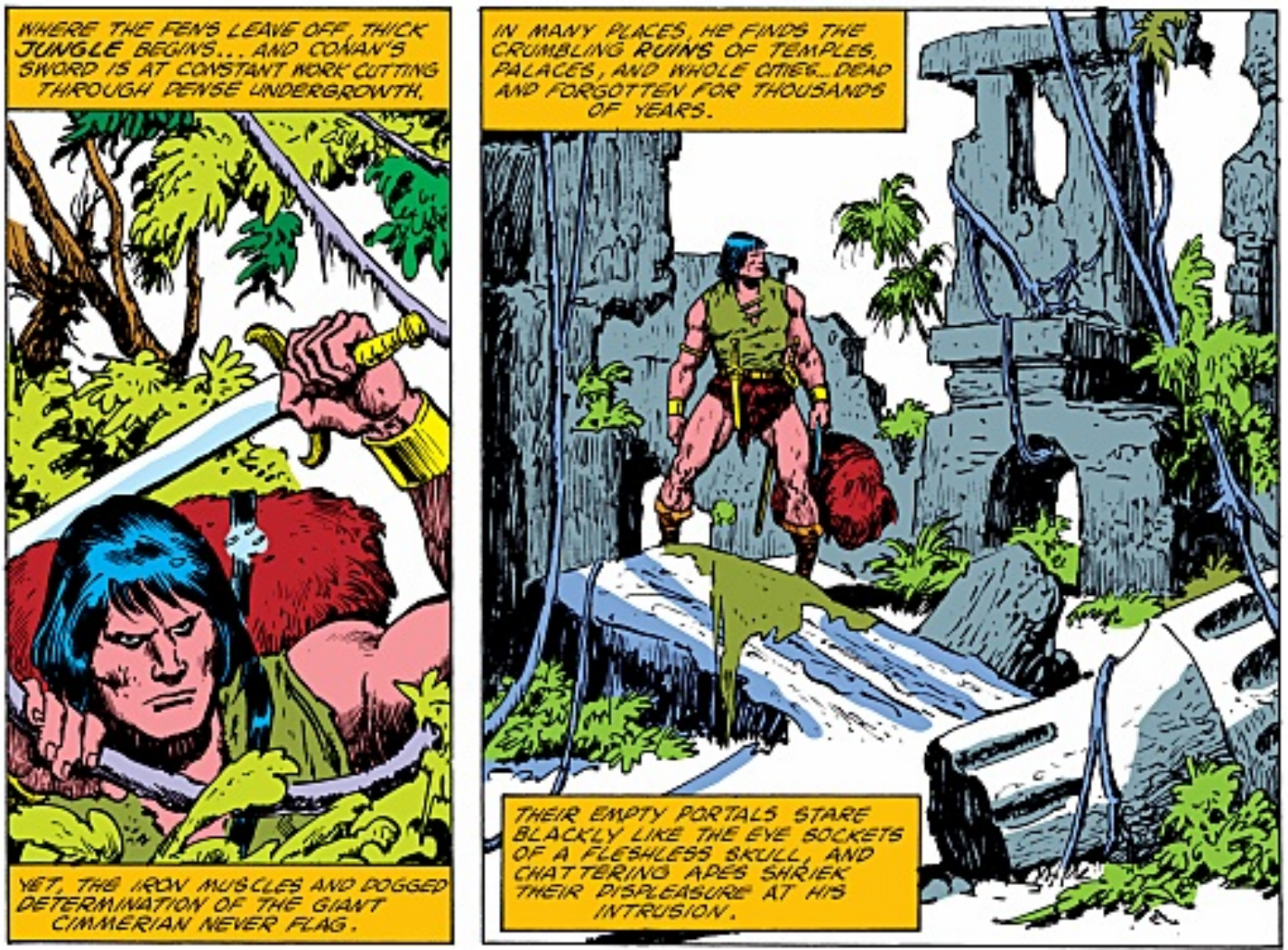
IN THAT AMORPHOUS TERROR, HE SEES MIRRORED ALL THE EVIL OF THE DARKER GULFS, WHERE SLAVERING THINGS DWELL, PREYING UPON HUMAN SOULS.
FORCES TEAR AT THE ROOTS OF HIS REASON--TILL HIS BARBARIAN INSTINCTS RUSH TO THE FORE OF HIS MIND--

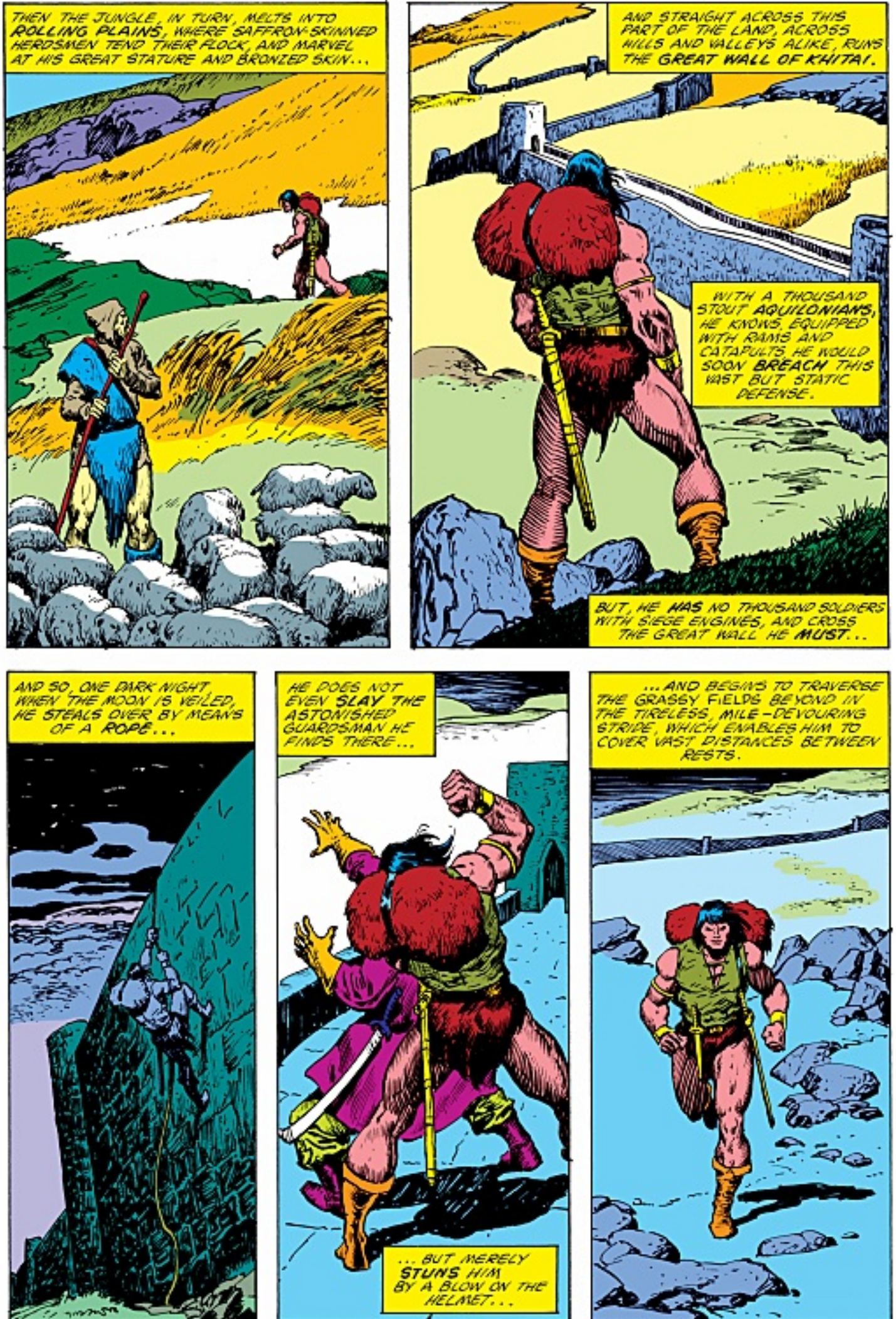
--AND HE LASHES OUT WITH THE FULL UNFETTERED FURY OF SELF-PRESERVATION!
HOW

EVEN HE IS ASTONISHED, HOWEVER, WHEN AT HIS VERY FIRST BLOW, THE MONSTER NOT ONLY UTTERS ITS SHRILL ULULATING CRY--
--BUT EVEN RELEASES HIM FOR AN INSTANT, AS IT CONTORTS WITH FEAR AND PAIN!
WL

THEN HE REALIZES --IT IS THE RING WHICH HAS DONE IT.
THE RING OF RAKHAMON GIVEN TO HIM BY THE WIZARD PELIAS*--AND POSSESSED OF UNKNOWN POWERS OF MAGIC AND SORCERY!
THE TALISMAN WHICH, HE PROMISED, WOULD AID CONAN TO SURVIVE... PERHAPS EVEN TO PREVAIL ... IN HIS QUEST TO DESTROY THE EVIL SORCERER YAH CHIENG AND REGAIN HIS LOST QUEEN
IT IS A DEADLY WEAPON, IT SEEMS, AGAINST THIS WRAITH OF THE ICY DARKNESS...
*SEE ISSUE #5 -- L.J.
... AND CONAN STRIKES AGAIN, AND AGAIN!
ARROOOOO
NOW, THE ULULATION CHANGES TO A SHRILL SHRIEK--
--AS THE WHITE HORROR FLINGS ITSELF BACKWARD TO ESCAPE THE TERROR OF THE RING --
--AND THE CIMMERIAN LUNGES AFTER IT, HIS RING-WEARING FIST WORKING LIKE A HAMMER.
ITS STEPS BRING IT TO THE BRINK OF AN ICY CHASM-- WITH CONAN STILL CHARGING IT LIKE AN AVENGING SPIRIT --
--TILL IT TOPPLES OVER THE EDGE!
AARROOOOOO
PELIAS GAVE ME A POWERFUL BAUBLE, INDEED!

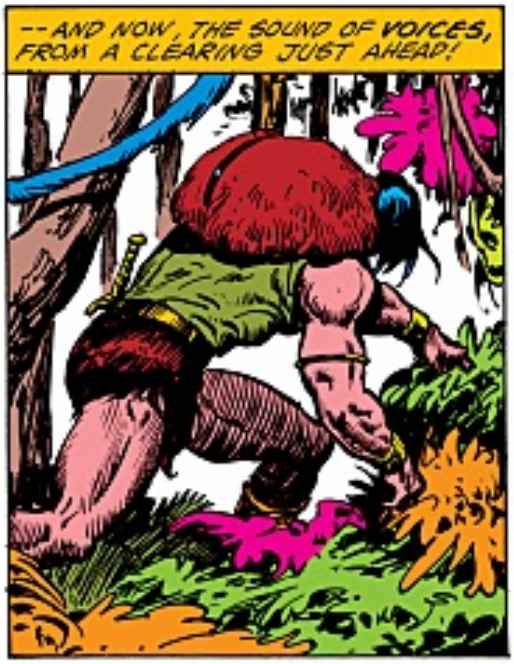

AND SO, MURMURING A WISH FOR A POX ON ALL SNOW-DEMONS, CONAN CONTINUES ON HIS WAY.
ERE, LONG THE SNOWS GIVE WAY TO THE ARID, SANDY LANDS THAT BORDER THE VAST WUHUAN DESERT...
...AND THOSE, IN TURN, TO VAST BOGS AND MARSHES...
...AYE, AND TO GREAT SWAMPS, WHERE CONAN NEEDS ALL OF HIS SWAMPCRAFT ACQUIRED IN THE LANDS FRINGING THE SEA OF VILAYET.


WHERE THE FENS LEAVE OFF, THICK JUNGLE BEGINS... AND CONAN'S SWORD IS AT CONSTANT WORK CUTTING THROUGH DENSE UNDERGROWTH.
YET, THE IRON MUSCLES AND DOGGED DETERMINATION OF THE GIANT CIMMERIAN NEVER FLAG.
IN MANY PLACES, HE FINDS THE CRUMBLING RUINS OF TEMPLES, PALACES, AND WHOLE CITIES...DEAD AND FORGOTTEN FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS.
THEIR EMPTY PORTALS STARE BLACKLY LIKE THE EYE SOCKETS OF A FLESHLESS SKULL, AND CHATTERING APES SHRIEK THEIR DISPLEASURE AT HIS INTRUSION.


THEN THE JUNGLE, IN TURN, MELTS INTO ROLLING PLAINS, WHERE SAFFRON-SKINNED HERDSMEN TEND THEIR FLOCK, AND MARVEL AT HIS GREAT STATURE AND BRONZED SKIN...
AND STRAIGHT ACROSS THIS PART OF THE LAND, ACROSS HILLS AND VALLEYS ALIKE, RUNS THE GREAT WALL OF KHITAI.
WITH A THOUSAND STOUT AQUILONIANS, HE KNOWS, EQUIPPED WITH RAMS AND CATAPULTS HE WOULD SOON BREACH THIS VAST BUT STATIC DEFENSE.
BUT, HE HAS NO THOUSAND SOLDIERS WITH SIEGE ENGINES, AND CROSS THE GREAT WALL HE MUST...
AND SO, ONE DARK NIGHT WHEN THE MOON IS VEILED, HE STEALS OVER BY MEANS OF A ROPE...
HE DOES NOT EVEN SLAY THE ASTONISHED GUARDSMAN HE FINDS THERE...
... BUT MERELY STUNS HIM BY A BLOW ON THE HELMET...
...AND BEGINS TO TRAVERSE THE GRASSY FIELDS BEYOND IN THE TIRELESS, MILE-DEVOURING STRIDE, WHICH ENABLES HIM TO COVER VAST DISTANCES BETWEEN RESTS.

TOO SOON, THE JUNGLE BEGINS ANEW.
HERE, HOWEVER, WERE SIGNS OF MEN'S PASSING... AND SOON CONAN IS SLINKING ALONG A NARROW PATH LIKE AN ANIMAL BORN TO JUNGLE LIFE.
THE KHITAN SLAVE TOLD HIM IT TOOK EIGHT DAYS TO CROSS THIS BELT OF FOREST. CONAN COUNTS ON MAKING IT IN FOUR.

HE IS THINKING THAT HE MUST NOW BE IN THAT JUNGLE BORDERING THE CITY-STATE OF PAIKANG, WHEN HE HEARS SOMETHING:
THE CLANK OF METAL--


--AND NOW, THE SOUND OF VOICES, FROM A CLEARING JUST AHEAD!

THERE, TWO KHITANS ARE TRUSSING A SAFFRON-HUED GIRL TO A TREE--YET IT IS THE MEN, NOT THE FEMALE, WHO FIRST ATTRACT THE BARBARIAN'S ATTENTION...
..FOR THEY ARE TALLER, MORE POWERFUL-LOOKING THAN MOST OF THE FAR-EASTERN FOLK.
HAVING LEARNED MORE THAN A SMATTERING OF THE LIQUID KHITAN TONGUE IN HIS YOUTH, CONAN CAN UNDERSTAND MUCH OF THE GIRL'S PLEADING--

--AND HIS BLOOD BOILS, AS HE REALIZES HE IS ABOUT TO WITNESS ONE OF THE CRUEL HUMAN SACRIFICES HE HAS TRIED TO STAMP OUT IN AQUILONIA.

IT IS THE CRACKLING OF THE UNDERBRUSH BENEATH THE CIMMERIAN'S FEET THAT FIRST REACHES THE EARS OF THE STARTLED KHITAN SOLDIERS--
FLEE! DO NOT TRY TO SAVE ME!
THESE ARE THE BODYGUARDS OF YAH-CHIENG --AND THE BEST SWORDSMEN IN KHITAI!
WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE GODS--?

YAH CHIENG! THE VERY WIZARD WHO, FELIAS SAID, PLANNED THE KIDNAPPING OF HIS BELOVED ZENOBIA.
THE NAME OF HIS FOE BRINGS AN EVEN GREATER FURY TO CONAN'S HEART--
AAAA
--AS WITH SLITTED EYES, HE STRIKES THE NEAREST KHITAN LIKE A CHARGING LION!
UNEQUALLED AS SWORDSMEN IN KHITAI THEY MAY WELL BE--
--BUT, BEFORE THE WRATH OF CONAN, THEY ARE BUT STRAWS IN A WIND THAT BLOWS FROM THE WEST--
--AND AS THE CAPTIVE WOMAN FOLLOWS THE FEARSOME FIGHT WITH WIDENED EYES--
--THE INFERIOR STEEL OF KHITAI SUDDENLY BREAKS BEFORE THE SUPPLE STRENGTH OF CONAN'S BLADE, FORGED FROM MATCHLESS HIMELIAN ORE BY A KHIRGULI SMITH--

--AND THE OUTLANDER'S SWORD RIPS THROUGH THE ARMOR PLATE INTO THE SECOND KHITAN'S HEART!
URRGK
STRANGE, MUSES CONAN, HOW DEATH-RATTLES SOUND ALIKE IN EVERY CLIME.

NOW, GIRL--
OH! WHEN YOU BURST FROM COVER, I--I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT HAVE BEEN FROM MY VILLAGE.
BUT NOW, I SEE YOU ARE A CHENG-LI... A WHITE-SKINNED FOREIGNER FROM THE LEGEND-LANDS WEST OF THE WALL!

W-WILL YOU DEVOUR ME ALIVE, AS THE LEGENDS SAY--
--OR WILL YOU TAKE ME BACK TO YOUR HOMELAND AS A SLAVE MOST WRETCHED?
NEITHER, GIRL.

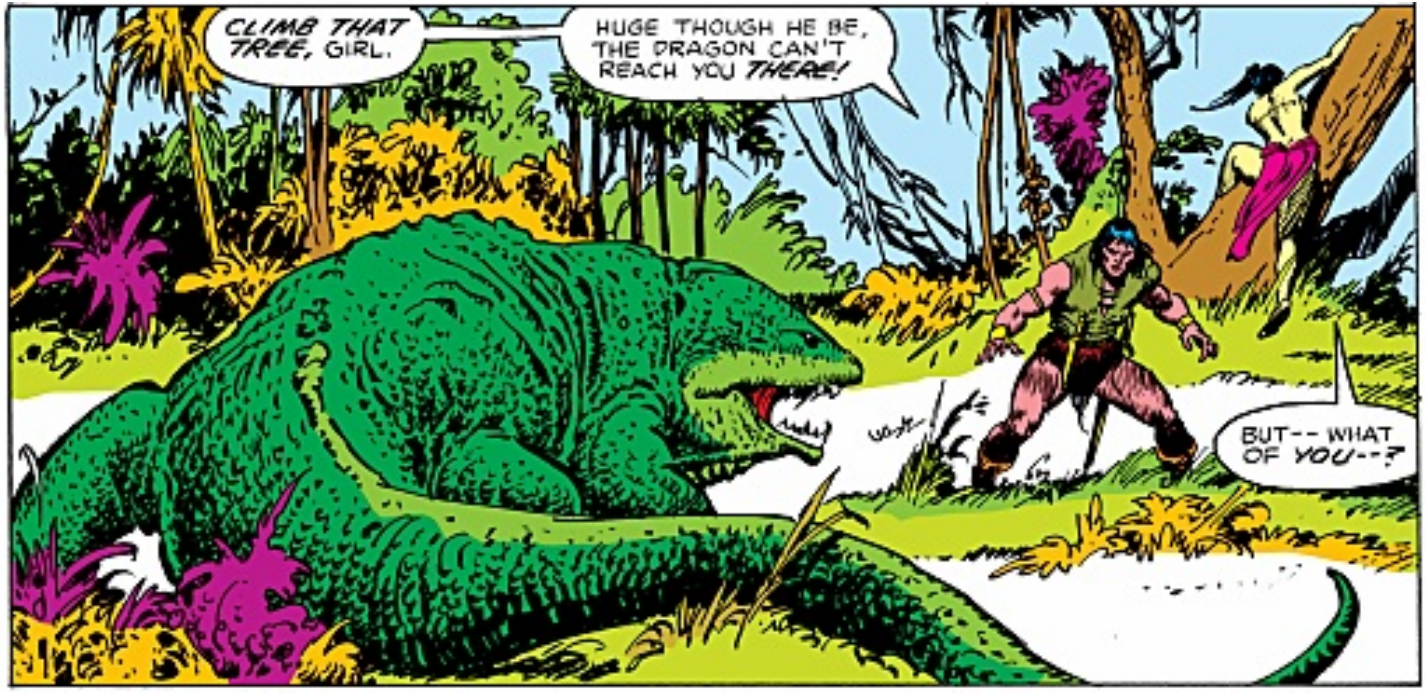
BY MACHA, I DIDN'T KNOW THEY BRED WOMEN THIS BEAUTIFUL IN THE GOLDEN LANDS.
IT SEEMS I SHOULD HAVE VISITED THESE PARTS LONG AGO.
YOUR ACCENTS ARE STRANGE...

...BUT, I UNDERSTAND YOUR WORDS--MOST OF THEM--AND YOUR ARRIVAL AND VICTORY WERE TIMED BY THE GODS.
IF NOT FOR YOU, I WOULD HAVE SOON BEEN DEAD!
DID THEY MEAN TO SLAY YOU OR--?

NAY! THEY WOULD HAVE LEFT ME, BOUND AS I WAS--
--HELPLESS PREY TO THE TERROR THAT THE EVIL YAH CHIENG HAS LET LOOSE IN THE JUNGLE.

I'VE A DEBT TO SETTLE WITH THAT DOG --BUT WHAT IS THIS JUNGLE TERROR YOU SPEAK OF, GIRL?
NONE HAS LIVED TO TELL--THOUGH MEN SAY THE ARCH-WIZARD HAS CONJURED UP A MONSTER OUT OF THE FORGOTTEN AGES.
THE FAIREST WOMEN AND ABLEST MEN ARE TAKEN BY HIS SOLDIERS TO FEED THE MAW OF--
NO! NOOOO! DO YOU HEAR, MAN FROM BEYOND THE WALL?
SOMETHING CRASHING THROUGH THE TREES NOT FAR AWAY!
HOLD! THAT SHADOW--!

CROM!


CLIMB THAT TREE, GIRL.
HUGE THOUGH HE BE, THE DRAGON CAN'T REACH YOU THERE!
BUT-- WHAT OF YOU--?

I'LL HAVE TO TAKE MY CHANCES!
COME, YOU EATER OF MOLDERING CARRION!
AT THE LAST POSSIBLE INSTANT BEFORE THOSE MIGHTY JAWS WOULD HAVE CLOSED ON HIM, CONAN SPRINGS TO ONE SIDE--

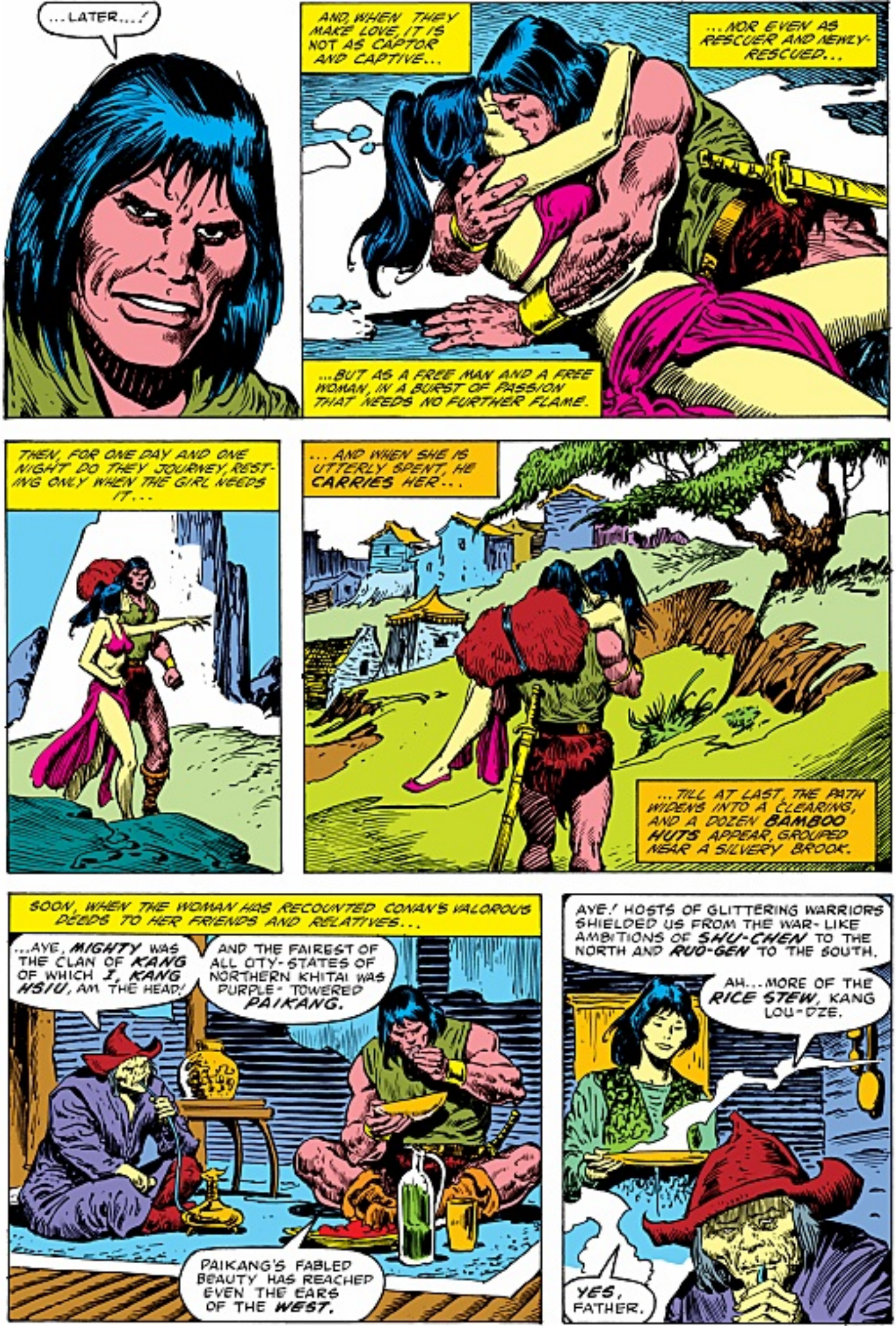
--AND THE HUGE REPTILE'S IMPETUS CARRIES IT CRASHING INTO THE UNDERGROWTH!

RUN, WAYFARER! YOU CANNOT REACH THIS TREE--AND THE BAMBOO WILL NOT PROTECT YOU FROM THE DRAGON!
TRUE ENOUGH, LASS,--

--BUT I DON'T INTEND TO HIDE BEHIND THE BAMBOO.

--AT LEAST NOT IN THE WAY YOU MEAN!
THEN FROM HER WISH PERCH, THE KHITAN GIRL WATCHES AMAZED--
--AS SHARP BAMBOO STEM IN HAND, THE STRANGER CHARGES HIS ONCOMING ADVERSARY--
--AND, WITH A MIGHTY HEAVE OF HIS STRAINING MUSCLES, RAMS THE POINT BETWEEN THOSE GAPING JAWS --
--AND DOWN INTO THE DARKNESS OF THE DRAGON'S GULLET!
IN A RAGE OF PAIN, THE MONSTER HURLS BACK ITS HEAD AND CONAN WITH IT.
JHNN
--HURLING HIM AND HALF HIS MAKESHIFT LANCE INTO A THICKET YARDS AWAY!
YET, AS HE DRAGS HIMSELF UP HE SEES THE DRAGON WRITHING, SHRIEKING IN ITS AGONY...

AND, STAYING CLEAR OF BOTH THRASHING TAIL AND SNAPPING JAWS--
--HE PUTS HIS WHOLE STRENGTH INTO ONE DESPERATE LUNGE FOR THE MONSTER'S EYE!
THE BLADE GOES IN LIKE A KNIFE THROUGH BUTTER--
--BUT AGAIN HE IS TOSSED INTO THE AIR--
--EVEN AS, WITH A FINAL TREMOR, THE HULK OF HIS TERRIBLE FOE SUBSIDES.
HMMMM...I MUST BE GROWING OLD.
A LITTLE FIGHT LIKE THAT WOULDN'T HAVE BOTHERED ME AT ALL IN THE OLD DAYS.
THE WORDS, HOWEVER, ARE ONLY THE BARBARIAN'S NAIVE WAY OF BELITTLING HIS FEAT...
... FOR HE KNOWS THERE WAS AS MUCH OF LUCK OR FATE IN HIS VICTORY AS ANYTHING ELSE.
YOU CAN COME DOWN NOW, LASS.
THE DEVIL ATE MORE BAMBOO THAN WAS GOOD FOR HIM.
NOW, LEAD ME TO THAT VILLAGE YOU SPOKE OF BEFORE.
I'LL NEED YOUR HELP, AS MUCH AS YOU DID MINE...


...LATER...!
AND, WHEN THEY MAKE LOVE, IT IS NOT AS CAPTOR AND CAPTIVE...
...NOR EVEN AS RESCUER AND NEWLY-RESCUED...
...BUT AS A FREE MAN AND A FREE WOMAN, IN A BURST OF PASSION THAT NEEDS NO FURTHER FLAME.
THEN, FOR ONE DAY AND ONE NIGHT DO THEY JOURNEY, RESTING ONLY WHEN THE GIRL NEEDS IT...
...AND WHEN SHE IS UTTERLY SPENT, HE CARRIES HER...
...TILL AT LAST, THE PATH WIDENS INTO A CLEARING, AND A DOZEN BAMBOO HUTS APPEAR, GROUPED NEAR A SILVERY BROOK.
SOON, WHEN THE WOMAN HAS RECOUNTED CONAN'S VALOROUS DEEDS TO HER FRIENDS AND RELATIVES...
...AYE, MIGHTY WAS THE CLAN OF KANG OF WHICH I, KANG HSIU, AM THE HEAD!
AND THE FAIREST OF ALL CITY-STATES OF NORTHERN KHITAI WAS PURPLE-TOWERED PAIKANG.
PAIKANG'S FABLED BEAUTY HAS REACHED EVEN THE EARS OF THE WEST.
AYE! HOSTS OF GLITTERING WARRIORS SHIELDED US FROM THE WAR-LIKE AMBITIONS OF SHU-CHEN TO THE NORTH AND RUO-GEN TO THE SOUTH.
AH...MORE OF THE RICE STEW, KANG LOU-DZE.
YES, FATHER.

AS I WAS SAYING: THE LANDS WERE RICH, THE CROPS PLENTIFUL.
I DWELT IN THE PALACE OF PAIKANG, SURROUNDED BY ALL THE SPLENDOR AND CULTURE OF OUR ANCIENT CIVILIZATION.
BESIDE WHICH, I'M SURE, OUR WESTERN WORLD IS BUT A GENERATION'S REMOVE FROM THE SAVAGE.
SO--WHAT HAPPENED, KANG HSIU?
THE ACCURSED ONE CAME-- YAH CHIENG.
ON ONE DARK NIGHT, HIS HORDES SWEPT UP FROM THE SOUTHEAST LIKE A RAVAGING BLAZE.
OUR ARMIES WERE WIPED OUT BY HIS FOUL ARTS.
"FIRE--DRY PLAGUE, EARTHQUAKE-- ALL SMOTE OUR BEAUTIFUL CITY!
"PAIKANG WAS SACKED IN FURY AND BLOOD, AMID LOOTING AND PILLAGING.
"I, MY FAMILY, AND SOME OF MY RETAINERS FLED ON FAST CAMELS.
"EVEN TODAY, I DOUBT IF YAH CHIENG KNOWS OF US, OR HE WOULD SURELY HAVE HAD US SLAIN ERE NOW.
KANG LOU-DZE HERE, WAS CAPTURED BY HIS SWORDSMEN WHILE VISITING A NEIGHBORING VILLAGE.
WE WOULD HAVE ABANDONED ALL HOPE LONG AGO, BUT FOR THE PROPHECY.
WHAT PROPHECY IS THAT?
"MY WIFE--KANG LOU-DZE'S MOTHER--WAS GIFTED WITH STRANGE POWERS OVER THE BIRDS AND THE WILD BEASTS," SAYS KANG HSIU.
"ONE OF THE MARAUDERS SLEW HER WHILE SHE PRAYED.
"I SLEW HER MURDERER, YET ERE SHE DIED, SHE WHISPERED INTO MY GRIEF-STRICKEN EAR...
D-DESPAIR NOT MY HUSBAND! THERE SHALL COME--FROM THE WEST--A CONQUEROR OF GREAT HEART AND NOBLE HEART --OF WHITE SKIN AND GREAT STRENGTH--
--A KING IN HIS OWN LAND--

SHE SAID THE GODS WHO GAVE HER THE STRANGE POWERS WERE WITH THIS MAN, WHO WOULD SMITE THE USURPER LIKE A THUNDERBOLT-CRUSHING THE FIEND LIKE A SNAKE UNDER HIS HEEL.
AND SO SPEAKING... SHE DIED.

THROUGH ALL THESE YEARS, WE WAITED FOR THE WHITE WARLORD... BUT EXCEPT FOR A TROOP OF MERCENARIES CAPTURED LAST YEAR BY YAH CHIENG, YOU ARE THE FIRST WHITE-SKIN WE'VE SEEN.
AND YOU COME-NOT AS A KING OR CONQUEROR--BUT ALONE, WEARING THE HABIT OF NOMADS.
MY DAYS ARE NUMBERED, AND I BEGIN AT LAST TO DESPAIR FOR THE FATE OF MY PEOPLE.

WHO SAID I'M NO KING, OLD MAN?
KING I AM--OF THE MIGHTIEST KINGDOM, OF THE WEST, FAIR AQUILONIA--CONQUERED IT BY MYSELF, I DID.
DON'T I FIT YOUR PRECIOUS PROPHECY?

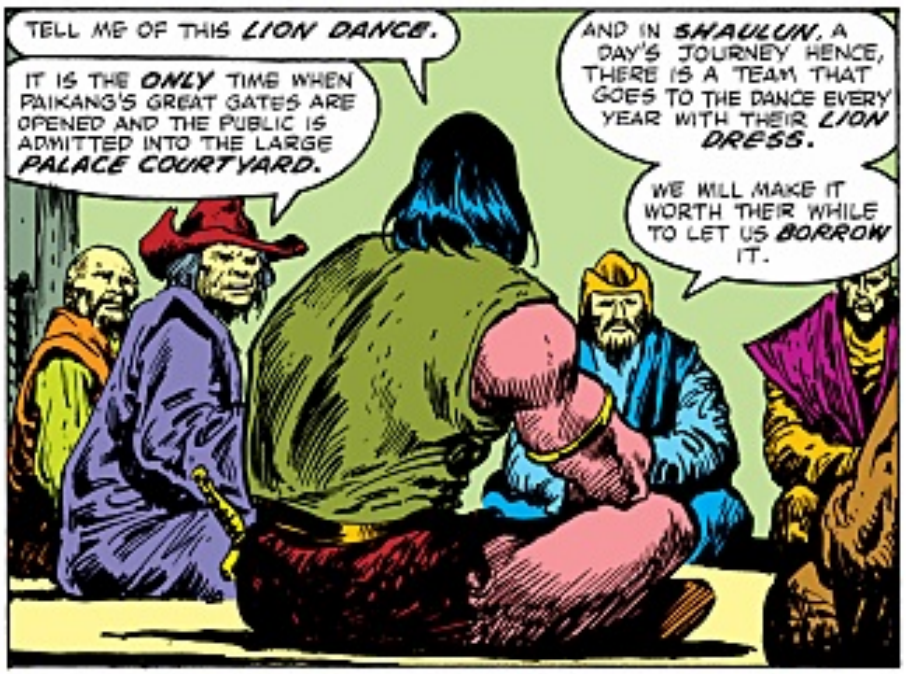
IS IT TRUE, CONAN? YOU ARE A KING?
I AM.
THEN THE GODS BE PRAISED! WE SHALL HAVE A FEAST OF PRAYER AND THANKS-GIVING TONIGHT, AND TOMORROW WE SHALL BE AT YOUR COMMAND.
WILL YOU LEAD US? WILL YOU--?

NOT SO HOTLY, MY FRIEND! EVEN I AM NOT SO RASH AS TO RUSH INTO THE MAW OF THIS SCOUNDREL WITH ONLY A SCORE OF MEN.
THE GODS, I'VE FOUND, HELP THOSE WHO USE THEIR WITS.
WE MUST LAY OUR PLANS CAREFULLY...!

SOON AFTERWARD, THE HIGH COUNCIL OF THE KHITAN VILLAGE OF OUTCASTS IS IN SPECIAL SESSION...
IT WILL BE NO EASY TASK TO WIN ENTRANCE TO THE FIEND'S CASTLE, KANG HSIU...

HIS CURSED SWORDSMEN GUARD IT DAY AND NIGHT... AND THERE ARE YAH CHIENG'S OWN UNEARTHLY POWERS IN THE BARGAIN.
THE PEOPLE OF PAIKANG HAVE NO WEAPONS, AND A STRAIGHTFORWARD ATTACK ON THE HEAVILY-FORTIFIED CITADEL IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH OUR SCANT FORCE.
YOU SPEAK TRUTH, LENG CHI--STEALTH AND TRICKERY PAVE THE ROAD TO SUCCESS.
IN A WEEK, YAH CHIENG WILL GIVE HIS ANNUAL FEAST IN CELEBRATION OF HIS CONQUEST OF PAIKANG.
THE CLIMAX OF THIS FEAST IS ALWAYS THE DANCE OF THE LIONS, PERFORMED WITH ALL THE ANCIENT CEREMONIES.

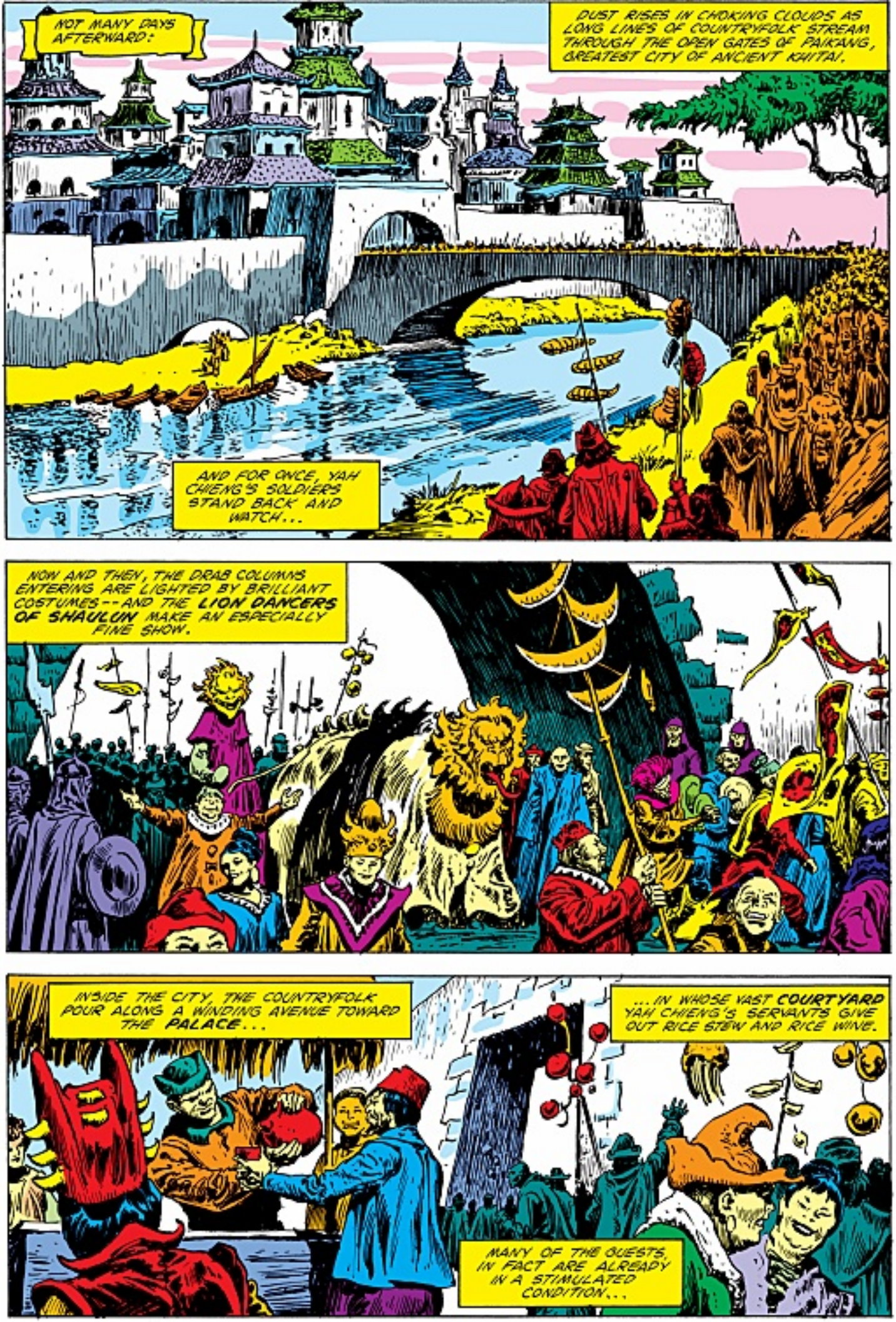
PERHAPS WE COULD SNEAK KING CONAN INTO THE CITY--CARRY HIM IN A BOX, OR--
NO EARLY COFFIN FOR ME, KANG HSIU!
WE WILL FIND A WAY TO GET ME INSIDE THE CITY, I ASSURE YOU, BUT ON MY OWN TWO FEET.


TELL ME OF THIS LION DANCE.
IT IS THE ONLY TIME WHEN PAIKANG'S GREAT GATES ARE OPENED AND THE PUBLIC IS ADMITTED INTO THE LARGE PALACE COURTYARD.
AND IN SHAULUN, A DAY'S JOURNEY HENCE, THERE IS A TEAM THAT GOES TO THE DANCE EVERY YEAR WITH THEIR LION DRESS.
WE WILL MAKE IT WORTH THEIR WHILE TO LET US BORROW IT.

PERHAPS IT WILL WORK, FOR YAH CHIENG OFTEN PLIES THE RABBLE WITH WINE, AND THERE ARISES SUCH CONFUSION THAT HIS SWORDSMEN MUST CHASE EVERYONE OUT WITH NAKED SWORDS.
BUT THIS TIME, HE WOULD MEET SOBER MEN WITH BLADES IN THEIR HANDS!
BUT HOW MANY MEN, O FOOLISH ONE?

AFTER ALL, YAH CHIENG HAS HIS FABLED TWO HUNDRED AT INSTANT CALL, BESIDES HIS REGULAR TROOPS.
AND EVEN IF SOME OF THE LATTER JOINED OUR SIDE IN THE FIGHT, WE HAVE BUT A FEW BITS OF ARMOR.
AYE -- WHILE THE TROOPS OF THE USURPER WILL BE SCALED AND PLATED LIKE THE CRAYFISH OF LAKE HO!
AND SO, THE ARGUMENT SWAYS, BACK AND FORTH--

--TILL SUDDENLY, CONAN SPEAKS UP IN A COMMANDING VOICE:
LORD KANG, YOU SAID SOMETHING TO ME BEFORE ABOUT A TROOP OF WESTERN MERCENARIES CAPTURED BY YAH CHIENG LAST YEAR.
TELL ME MORE OF THIS MATTER.
IT WAS IN THE MONTH OF THE HOG, CONAN OF AQUILONIA.
A COMPANY OF FIFTY CAME MARCHING OUT OF THE WEST--DESERTERS WHO HAD SERVED THE KING OF--WHAT WAS THE NAME OF THE KINGDOM, AGAIN?
TURAN.
TURAN, THAT IS IT! THEY HAD COME EASTWARD TO SEEK THEIR FORTUNES IN KHITAI.
THE VILLAGERS OF THESE PARTS FAVORED THEM BECAUSE THEY DID NOT LOOT AND PILLAGE.
THEY MARCHED ON TO PAIKANG AND OFFERED THEIR SWORDS TO YAH CHIENG.
HE FEASTED THEM--BUT LATER HE CUT OFF THEIR CAPTAIN'S HEAD AND CAST THE REST INTO HIS DUNGEON.
WHY DID HE DO THIS?
IT SEEMS HE WANTED THEM FOR SACRIFICES IN SOME GREAT RITE OF DEVILISH MAGIC.
AT LAST ACCOUNTS, THEY STILL AWAITED THEIR DOOM--THOUGH THAT WAS THREE MONTHS AGO.
THEN, AT CONAN'S BEHEST, KANG HSIU BEGINS DRAWING LINES ON THE EARTHEN FLOOR...
OF COURSE, THE USURPER MAY HAVE CHANGED THINGS SINCE I DWELT THEREIN, BUT...
HOURS LATER, WHEN PLANS HAVE BEEN MADE DOWN TO THE LAST DETAIL...
TO THE FUTURE AND HONOR OF GREAT, PAIKANG--
--AND MAY THE HEAD OF THE SNAKE BE CRUSHED UNDER THE BOOT OF THE AVENGER!
I'LL DRINK TO THAT!
AND, AS AN ANSWERING SHOUT GOES UP, CONAN DRINKS--HIS BRAIN WHIRLING.
AT LAST, HE IS WITHIN REACH OF HIS GOAL--AND PERHAPS HIS QUEEN!


NOT MANY DAYS AFTERWARD:
DUST RISES IN CHOKING CLOUDS AS LONG LINES OF COUNTRYFOLK STREAM THROUGH THE OPEN GATES OF PAIKANG, GREATEST CITY OF ANCIENT KHITAI.
AND FOR ONCE, YAH CHENG'S SOLDIERS STAND BACK AND WATCH...
NOW AND THEN, THE DRAB COLUMNS ENTERING ARE LIGHTED BY BRILLIANT COSTUMES--AND THE LION DANCERS OF SHAOLUN MAKE AN ESPECIALLY FINE SHOW.
INSIDE THE CITY, THE COUNTRYFOLK POUR ALONG A WINDING AVENUE TOWARD THE PALACE...
...IN WHOSE VAST COURTYARD YAH CHENG'S SERVANTS GIVE OUT RICE STEW AND RICE WINE.
MANY OF THE GUESTS, IN FACT ARE ALREADY IN A STIMULATED CONDITION...

...AS JUGGLERS AND MUSICIANS PLY THEIR FESTIVE TRADES...
OVER THIS WAY, CONAN.

THE DANCING WILL SOON BEGIN... BUT BE NOT SO PROFICIENT AS TO WIN THE PRIZE.
IT WOULD NOT ADVANCE OUR PLANS TO HAVE THE JUDGE DEMAND THAT WE DOFF YOUR HEADPIECE TO RECEIVE IT.
THAT IT WOULD NOT, LENG CHI.

SOON, AMID THE RISING TURMOIL IN THE COURTYARD, NO ONE SEES A GREAT BRONZE SHADOW FLIT OUT FROM UNDER ONE OF THE LION DRESSES...
...AND SOON, CONAN THE CIMMERIAN FOLLOWS A STAIRWAY THAT LEADS HIM DOWN A DARK CORRIDOR.

HE HAS LEARNED WELL THE PLAN OF THE CASTLE, AS MAPPED OUT FOR HIM BY KANG HSIU.

ONE OF YAH CHIENG'S TWO HUNDRED LOLLS ON HIS DUNGEON BENCH BENEATH THE CITADEL...
MAKE NO NOISE, YOU PRISONERS--OR IT WILL GO ILL WITH YOU THIS DAY!
WHY SHOULD I, OF ALL MEN, SIT HERE, WHEN FESTIVITIES ARE IN PROGRESS FAR ABOVE?

IF I HAD MY WAY I'D HAVE ALREADY SLAUGHTERED THE WHOLE LOT OF--
RRRGGK--!

IT IS GOOD TO SLAY FOES AGAIN, CONAN MUSES.
THE OLD BARBARIAN INSTINCTS BOIL IN HIS BLOOD, AND HIS LIPS WRITHE IN THE SNARL OF THE HUNTING BEAST.

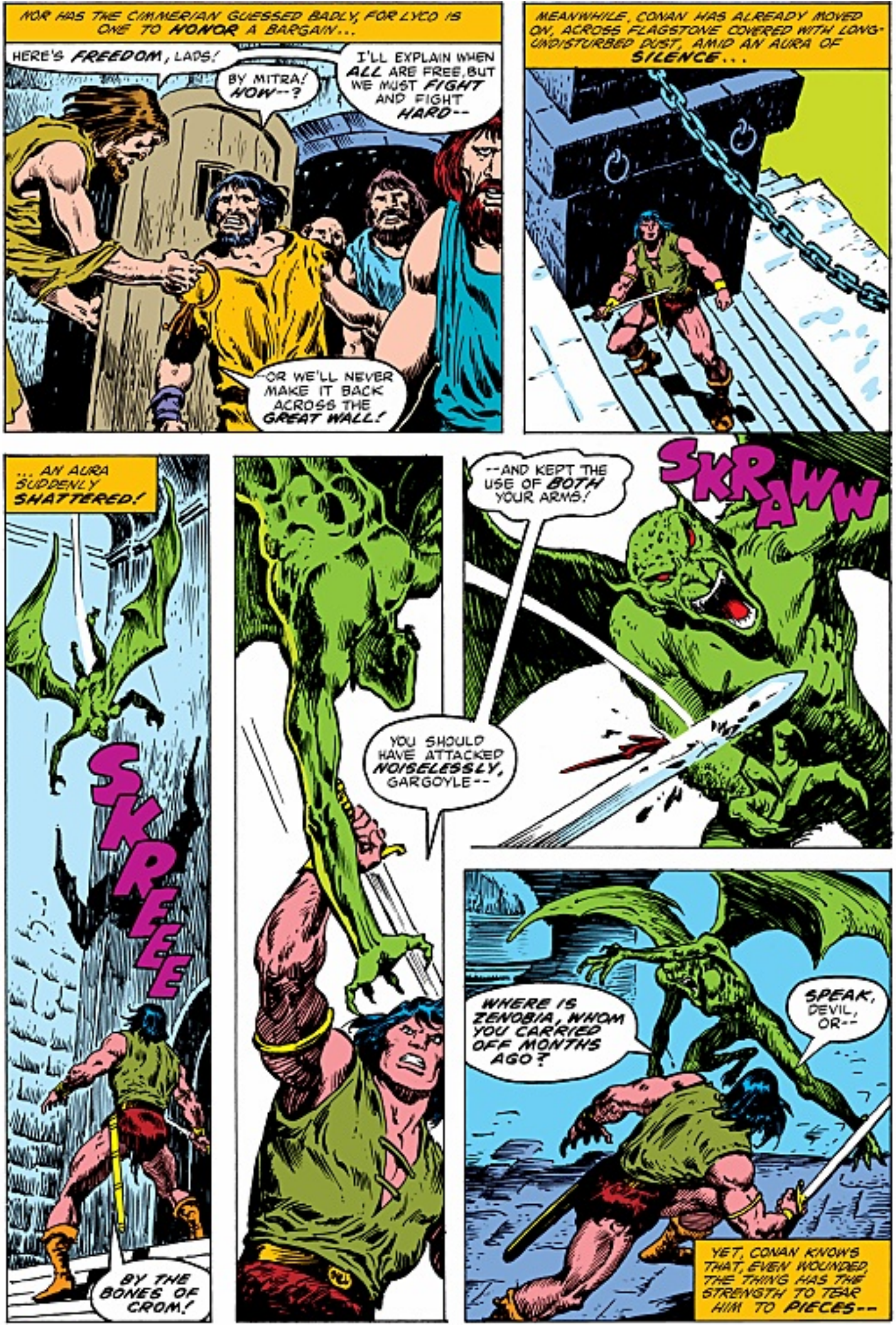
NOW, IF HE CAN JUST TALK SOME SENSE INTO THE IMPRISONED TURANIANS--!
HO, INSIDE THERE--I'M UNLOCKING YOUR CELL DOOR.

BUT HEAR MY WORDS, OR I'LL--
CONAN! BLESS MY KOTHIAN COLLARBONE!
MITRA! LYCO OF KHORSHEMISH! IS THAT YOU
I SIGN ON WITH TURANIAN MERCENARIES--GET TOSSED IN A CELL IN KHITAI--AND RESCUED BY A CIMMERIAN.*
* LIKE MOST MEN OF HIS TIME, LYCO HAS NO WAY OF KNOWING THAT THIS IS THE SAME CONAN WHO IS KING OF AQUILONIA --LOUISE.

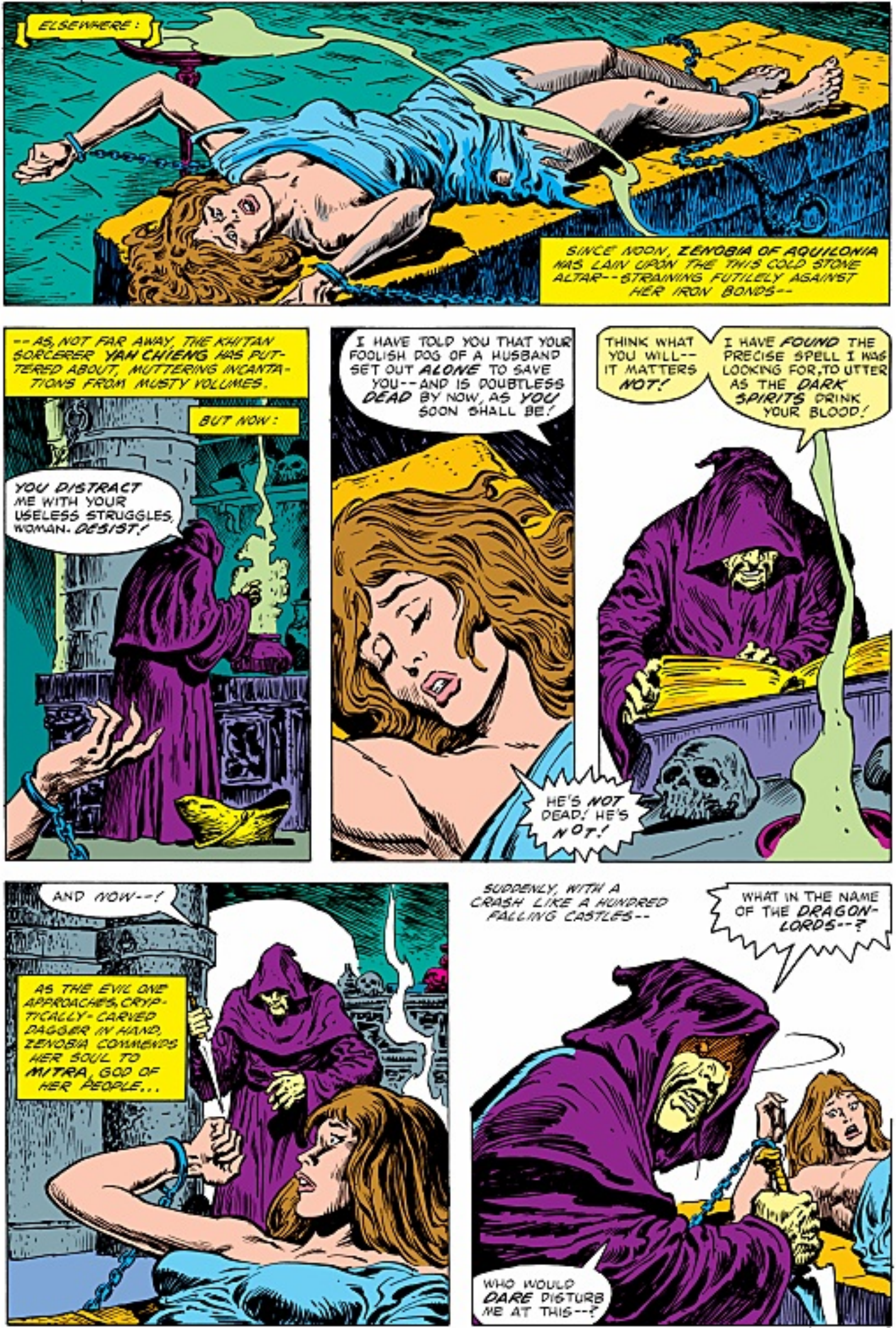
BY ISHTAR--ARE YOU HERE WITH AN OUTLAW HOST TO DEAL WITH THAT DEVIL YAH CHIENG? OR HAVE YOU FLOWN ON THE BACK OF AN EAGLE?
NEITHER, OLD COMRADE, I'M AFTER THE USURPER, YES...
BUT I'VE COUNTED ON FINDING MY ARMY HERE! HAVE I?

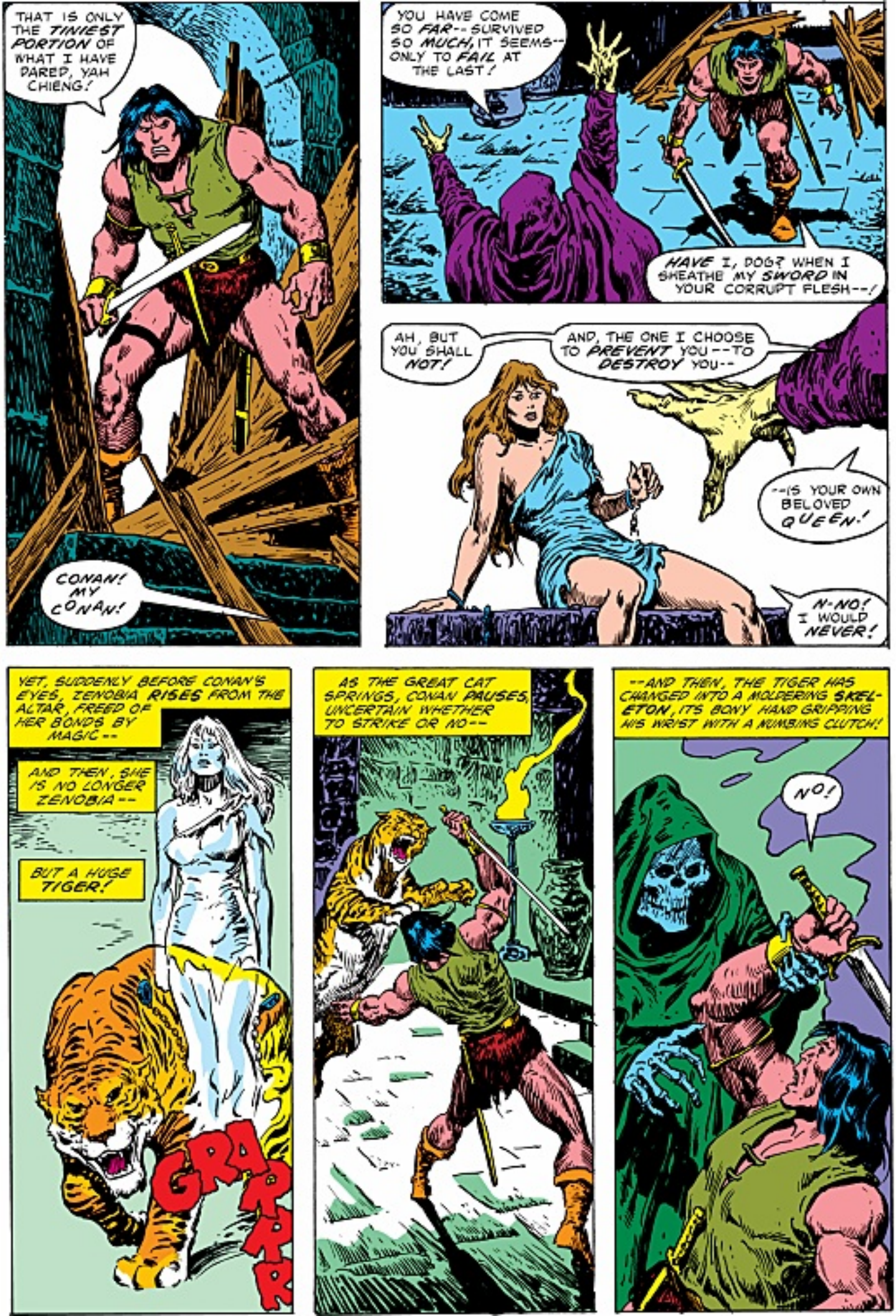
AYE, BY THE GODS! MOST OF THE PRISONERS HERE--FROM EVERY LAND EAST OF VENDHYA--LONG ONLY TO FLESH THEIR STEEL IN KHITAN BRAVOS!
YOU'LL ALL HAVE YOUR CHANCE! FREE THE MEN--EQUIP THEM FROM THE ARMORY DOWN YONDER CORRIDOR.
STRIKE TO AVENGE YOUR OWN SUFFERING--AND TO FREE THE QUEEN OF AQUILONIA!

YOU'LL FIND KHITAN ALLIES AMONG THE THRONG IN THE COURTYARD.
NOW GO, SWIFTLY!
A MAD ONE, THIS BARBARIAN--TRAVELING ACROSS THE WORLD TO RESCUE A WOMAN!
STILL ADMIRATION GLOWS IN THE KOTHIAN'S EYES AS CONAN STRIDES OFF...


NOR HAS THE CIMMERIAN GUESSED BADLY, FOR LYCO IS ONE TO HONOR A BARGAIN...
HERE'S FREEDOM, LADS!
BY MITRA! HOW--?
I'LL EXPLAIN WHEN ALL ARE FREE, BUT WE MUST FIGHT AND FIGHT HARD--
--OR WE'LL NEVER MAKE IT BACK ACROSS THE GREAT WALL!
MEANWHILE, CONAN HAS ALREADY MOVED ON, ACROSS FLAGSTONE COVERED WITH LONG-UNDISTURBED DUST, AMID AN AURA OF SILENCE...
... AN AURA SUDDENLY SHATTERED!
SKREEE
BY THE BONES OF CROM!
YOU SHOULD HAVE ATTACKED NOISELESSLY, GARGOYLE--
--AND KEPT THE USE OF BOTH YOUR ARMS!
SKRAWW
WHERE IS ZENOBIA, WHOM YOU CARRIED OFF MONTHS AGO?
SPEAK, DEVIL, OR--
YET, CONAN KNOWS THAT, EVEN WOUNDED, THE THING HAS THE STRENGTH TO TEAR HIM TO PIECES--

THUS, WHEN IT SPRINGS ANEW-- HIS INSTINCT FOR SURVIVAL TAKES OVER, AND--
GRARRG
ONLY SUCH A THRUST TO ITS VITALS COULD HAVE STOPPED THE CREATURE, CONAN IS SURE...
YET, EVEN SO, AS HE STALKS ONWARD, HE WISHES IT HAD SPOKEN BEFORE IT DIED.
IS ZENOBIA, TOO, ALREADY DEAD? PERHAPS VICTIM OF SOME EARLIER SACRIFICE BY THE HUMAN MONSTER CALLED YAH CHIENG?
FOR THE FIRST TIME, CONAN CANNOT STOP HIMSELF FROM CONSIDERING THAT POSSIBILITY.
THEN, AS HE APPROACHES THE TUNNEL OF DEATH WHICH KANG HSIU SAID LEAD TO YAH CHIENG'S OWN QUARTERS--
YMIR'S BLOOD!
LOST IN THOUGHT, HOWEVER, HE HAD COME TOO NEAR THE DOORWAY BEFORE THE FLAMES ERUPTED...
AND EVEN AS HE RAISES HIS HAND--THE FIRE DOES NOT SEAR HIM!
ONCE AGAIN-- THE RING OF RAKHAMON, GIVEN HIM BY THE WIZARD PELIAS!
THEN, AS HE SWEEPS HIS HAND THROUGH THE LICKING FLAMES, THEY FALL TINKLING TO THE FLOOR--LIKE SHARDS OF GLASS...
...AND THE REST OF THE FIRE IS SUDDENLY STIFF AND COLD, LIKE COAGULATED COLORS OF EVIL.
AS CONAN HURDLES THE FOSSILIZED BLAZE, HE FEELS IRRESISTIBLE-- SURGING WITH VAST CONFIDENCE--
--AND HIS HAND IS RAISED TO SMITE WITH THE RING OF POWER!


ELSEWHERE:
SINCE NOON, ZENOBIA OF AQUILONIA HAS LAIN UPON THIS COLD STONE ALTAR--STRAINING FUTILELY AGAINST HER IRON BONDS--
--AS, NOT FAR AWAY, THE KHITAN SORCERER YAN CHIENG HAS PUTTERED ABOUT, MUTTERING INCANTATIONS FROM MUSTY VOLUMES.
BUT NOW:
YOU DISTRACT ME WITH YOUR USELESS STRUGGLES, WOMAN. DESIST!
I HAVE TOLD YOU THAT YOUR FOOLISH DOG OF A HUSBAND SET OUT ALONE TO SAVE YOU--AND IS DOUBTLESS DEAD BY NOW, AS YOU SOON SHALL BE!
HE'S NOT DEAD! HE'S NOT!
THINK WHAT YOU WILL--IT MATTERS NOT!
I HAVE FOUND THE PRECISE SPELL I WAS LOOKING FOR, TO UTTER AS THE DARK SPIRITS DRINK YOUR BLOOD!
AND NOW--!
AS THE EVIL ONE APPROACHES, CRYPTICALLY-CARVED DAGGER IN HAND, ZENOBIA COMMENDS HER SOUL TO MITRA, GOD OF HER PEOPLE...
SUDDENLY, WITH A CRASH LIKE A HUNDRED FALLING CASTLES--
WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE DRAGON-LORDS--?
WHO WOULD DARE DISTURB ME AT THIS--?


THAT IS ONLY THE TINIEST PORTION OF WHAT I HAVE DARED, YAH CHIENG!
CONAN! MY CONAN!
YOU HAVE COME SO FAR-- SURVIVED SO MUCH, IT SEEMS-- ONLY TO FAIL AT THE LAST!
HAVE I, DOG? WHEN I SHEATHE MY SWORD IN YOUR CORRUPT FLESH--!
AH, BUT YOU SHALL NOT!
AND, THE ONE I CHOOSE TO PREVENT YOU--TO DESTROY YOU--
--IS YOUR OWN BELOVED QUEEN!
N-NO! I WOULD NEVER!
YET, SUDDENLY BEFORE CONAN'S EYES, ZENOBIA RISES FROM THE ALTAR, FREED OF HER BONDS BY MAGIC--
AND THEN, SHE IS NO LONGER ZENOBIA--
BUT A HUGE TIGER!
GRARRR
AS THE GREAT CAT SPRINGS, CONAN PAUSES, UNCERTAIN WHETHER TO STRIKE OR NO--
--AND THEN, THE TIGER HAS CHANGED INTO A MOLDERING SKELETON, ITS BONY HAND GRIPPING HIS WRIST WITH A NUMBING CLUTCH!
NO!

YOU ARE NOT ZENOBIA, THOUGH I SAW HER CHANGE INTO A TIGER AND THE TIGER TO YOU!
YOU'RE NOT ZENOBIA!
YOU'RE NOT!
AS HE STRIKES OUT, HE FEELS A BURNING SENSATION UPON ONE OF HIS FINGERS--
THE RING OF RAKHAMON!
ARRH-!
AWAY WITH THIS FOUL SIZZLING THING!
THEN COMES A RINGING PEAL OF EVIL LAUGHTER FROM THE LIPS OF YAH CHENG...
MY MAGICAL SUGGESTION MADE YOU DO, FOOL, WHAT YOU SHOULD NEVER HAVE DONE--
--RELEASE THE RING GIVEN YOU BY MY OLD ENEMY PELIAS!
NOW YOU BELONG TO ME--AND TO DEATH!
A MIST RISES FROM THE FLOOR AROUND THE CIMMERIAN AND HE CANNOT MOVE!
NOW, HE BEGINS TO SEE VISIONS IN THE SHIFTING BLUE WISPS --
--AND ALL THE MONSTERS FEARED BY MAN SINCE FIRST HE CRAWLED FROM THE SEA WHIRL IN ENDLESS SUCCESSION BEFORE HIS SIGHT!

THEIR STRANGLING HANDS REACH OUT TO CRUSH HIS THROAT--
THEIR GLOWING EYES SEEK TO DRAW THE VERY SOUL FROM HIS BODY DOWN TO HELL AND DAMNATION.
--AND HE IS SUDDENLY OVERWHELMED BY THE CERTAINTY OF DEFEAT.
DARKNESS AND EVIL WILL TRIUMPH IN THE WORLD, DESPITE ALL OF HIS BATTLES--
-- AS HE FEELS THE LAST STRAINS OF CONSCIOUSNESS SLIPPING FROM HIM --
AND THEN, INEXPLICABLY, HE IS PULLED AWAY FROM THAT ENSORCELED, DEMONIAC GRIP--
--AND IT SEEMS TO CONAN, THAT HE IS SOMEPLACE ELSE ENTIRELY... WITHIN...
... A GREAT AND GLOOMY HALL OF LOGS WHERE DARK AND SOMBER MEN STAND ABOUT--A THRONE.
AND ON THAT THRONE SITS A BLACK-HAIRED KING TALL AND MOODY-- WITH BLACK EYES IN AN AUSTERE AND MERCILESS FACE AND A VOICE REACHING OUT TO HIS MIND:
MAN OF CIMMERIA-- DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?
NO, I --YES! YES!
YOU ARE-- CROM, LORD OF THE MOUND --AND GOD OF THE CIMMERIANS.

AYE--I AM CROM WHOM YOU HAVE EVER SWORN BY BUT NEVER WORSHIPPED.
YET, YOU ARE A SON OF CROM--AND I WILL NOT LET YOU SUFFER ETERNAL DAMNATION.
YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN TRUE TO ME IN YOUR HEART--AND THE BLACK ARTS OF THE EAST SHALL NOT HAVE YOUR SOUL!
AS THE GREAT LIGHTS BURSTS FROM THAT OUT-STRETCHED HAND, CONAN SUDDENLY FEELS ALL HIS OLD POWER SURGE BACK INTO HIS BODY--
--THE BLUE MIST AND THE DEMONS THEREIN FALLING FROM HIM LIKE THE LAST LEAVES OF AUTUMN.
AND HE IS ONCE MORE IN THE SACRIFICIAL CHAMBER OF YAH CHIENG!
NO! YOU CANNOT HAVE ESCAPED THE DOOM OF THE BLUE MIST!
BUT I HAVE, YOU KHITAN DOG!
THEN YOU SHALL SAVOR YOUR TRIUMPH--
--ALONE!
NNOOO
IT'S TOO LATE FOR YOU, YAH CHIENG!
THE VERY GODS HAVE DOOMED YOU--AND YOUR DARK POWERS ALL ARE BROKEN!
UNNGH

AS THE FEARFUL WIZARD STRUGGLES FOR A BREATH THAT WILL NOT COME, CONAN TIGHTENS HIS IRON GRIP...
OUTSIDE, YOUR BLOODY EMPIRE IS CRASHING IN RUINS--CUT DOWN BY PRISONERS, AND BY THE PEOPLE OF PAIKANG!
KFFFF
TO BLACKEST HELL I SEND YOU, YAH CHIENG--
--AND MAY YOU ROT THERE FOREVER!
GGKK
THERE IS A MUFFLED CRACK--
--AND CONAN RISES FROM THE LIFELESS CORPSE.
OH--MY BELOVED --YOU CAME FOR ME, AS I KNEW YOU WOULD!
ONLY ONE TASK REMAINS TO DO, MY LOVE...
...AND NOW EVEN THAT IS DONE!
THUS, AS THE VICTORIOUS HOST COME SHOUTING AND CHEERING THROUGH THE DOOR, THEY FIND THEIR LEADER EMBRACING HIS BEAUTEOUS QUEEN WITH ALL THE ARDOR OF A MAN IN LOVE FOR THE FIRST TIME.
AND THAT NIGHT, CONAN OF AQUILONIA SACRIFICES TO CROM, GOD OF THE BLACK-HAIRED CIMMERIAN RACE...
...FOR THE SECOND TIME IN TWENTY-FIVE YEARS!

...AND THUS, YOUNG PRINCE, YOUR SIRE HAS COME HOME TO TARANTIA, WHERE HE HAS RULED IN MAJESTY IF NOT ALWAYS PEACE, FOR MORE THAN A DECADE.
SEVERAL YEARS MORE, COUNT TROCERO, SINCE I WAS BORN A YEAR LATER.
A FEW MONTHS LESS THAN THAT ACTUALLY.
BUT WHAT OF THE HOMEWARD JOURNEY?
WAS IT AS UNEVENTFUL AS THIS ONE?
ALMOST, SON.
MY KING! I DID NOT NEAR YOU THERE!
I-- AM SORRY IF AUGHT I SAID OFFENDED YOU, SIRE-- GETTING CARRIED AWAY AS I DID, AND TELLING THE STORY OF YOUR EASTWARD JOURNEY WITH-- WITH--
WITH WARTS AND ALL, YOU MEAN, TROCERO?
ALL YOU SAID WAS TRUE--AND THAT'S WHAT COUNTS.
AND IT ALL MAKES A MOST GLORIOUS HERITAGE, FATHER--ONE I SHALL STRIVE TO LIVE UP TO, ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE!
I DOUBT IT NOT, CONN... I DOUBT IT NOT.
BE NOT TOO QUICK, HOWEVER, TO SPEAK OF ME AS A RELIC OF THE LEGEND-LADEN PAST...
FOR, I STILL LIVE-- AND WHILE I LIVE, KING CONAN AND HIS MOST VALIANT SON SHALL FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT--
--AND OUR TWIN SWORDS SHALL DRINK DEEP THE LIFEBLOOD OF OUR FOES!
SO BE IT EVER, BY CROM!
NEXT: CHALLENGE FOR A KING!
AN ALL-NEW, ORIGINAL ADVENTURE OF CONAN AND CONN!

KING CONAN

c/o MARVEL COMICS GROUP
575 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022

LOUISE JONES
EDITOR
DANNY FINGEROTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear people,

KING CONAN #6 (featuring part two of your CONAN THE AVENGER adaptation) was typically good Conan. The novel has plenty of action and intrigue along with barbaric elements, a mix which has made Conan my favorite hero for the last eight years.

The comic-book adaptation stays close to the novel, with a certain amount of scene reshuffling for the comics medium. "Vengeance from the Desert" is the perfect example. A lot of fight scenes are suggested, but not given too much space, the focus being instead on the intrigues and human backstabbing and all the other facets that raise Conan a cut above the gore which sometimes gets labeled Sword-and-Sorcery.

The artwork by John Buscema and Ernie Chan has never been better. As I have said before of these two men: Buscema & Chan can do no wrong.

Mark Ryan
St. Louis, MO

Dear wild-and-crazy barbarians:

I have been a Marvel fan for about ten years now, reading most of the comics that you've introduced. Most recently, I've become a Conan freak — especially since KING CONAN has come out.

I loved #6 and cheered the return of the Zuagirs. I have only one suggestion: please put out KING CONAN more often. I can't stand the torture of waiting three months for the next issue!

Gregg Stein
321 East 45th Street
New York, NY 10017

Dear Marvel:

When it comes to CONAN, I'll take the KING! It was nice seeing Conan on the shifting desert sands, but I'm getting a little tired of seeing people spit in Conan stories.

Quest-style stories are always enjoyable — especially sword-and-sorcery quest stories — and the search for Zenobia is one of the best. And, when they talk about "comic novels," this one'll certainly qualify after all the episodes are published — being several hundred pages long. You should issue CONAN THE AVENGER in the new special album format that Marvel's been talking about, with hardcovers and all, printed on good paper. How about it?

Y'know, I don't know if you folks have ever thought about it, but Conan stands alone when it comes to comics characters. He never entertains self-doubts, which sets him apart from so many of the other Marvel heroes, and is strangely refreshing in its own way. Instead of agonizing and deliberating over every decision, Conan knows what he wants, and goes right ahead to get it. Self-confident, sure, cowed not even by supernatural encounters, able to sleep soundly at night, fight his way through hordes of foes, and woo the women, he's quite a guy. Yet he's definitely human, with his own down-to-earth foibles — such as tearing savagely at food, having bad manners and a certain lack of couth.

As for KING CONAN, I hope you exploit to the full the incredible potential that his position promises — with all the intrigue, the somewhat more complex problems of state, the conflict of wearing the crown, you know... the works! This magazine could become another milestone in the Marvel Age, but only if you don't blow it. I trust you won't.

Did you ever stop to wonder, even for a moment, about what Robert E. Howard might have thought of all this? Ah, if only an armload of issues of CONAN could have been shipped through a time warp, back to him then, what surprise and excitement he might have felt! You've definitely done him proud — and now there's a Conan *movie* in the works, too! Wow, who would have thought, way back when Marvel's first Conan comic hit the stands, that the barbarian would become this popular?

All right, enough speculating on my part (you can publish my next letter in WHAT IF...?). So long, dog-brothers, and here's to a long reign for KING CONAN!

Samuel Katz
421 Orchard Street
Bayonne, FL

You raised some interesting points about what sets Conan apart, Sam — and we always welcome armchair analysis of our characters, so what do the rest of you out there have to say? As for a collection of the CONAN THE AVENGER adaptation issues as a Marvel Album, we have no such plans at present — although don't be surprised to see an all-new savage surprise in the aforementioned format in the not-too-far future!

Dear Louise,

It's pretty strange seeing Conan in a king's wardrobe while slinging his savage sword. Still, KING CONAN is a terrific mag and #6 was a thoroughly enjoyable issue. Prince Conn is a spunky character as Conan's son.

Just one thing: can't you do something about increasing the frequency of publication on KING CONAN?

Napoleon Zivkovic
Paterson, NJ

What? You mean, even with a *monthly* CONAN THE BARBARIAN regular-size comic, and a *monthly* SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN full-length magazine, this year's CONAN ANNUAL, not to mention this *quarterly* double-length KING CONAN comic — you guys want *more*? By Crom and by cracky! That's good news to us, except for one little thing... how the heck we manage to meet the deadlines now is a mystery to us, and we won't even venture to guess what might happen if we push our luck any further! Still, you never know...!

Dear Aquilonians,

LONG LIVE THE KING!!!

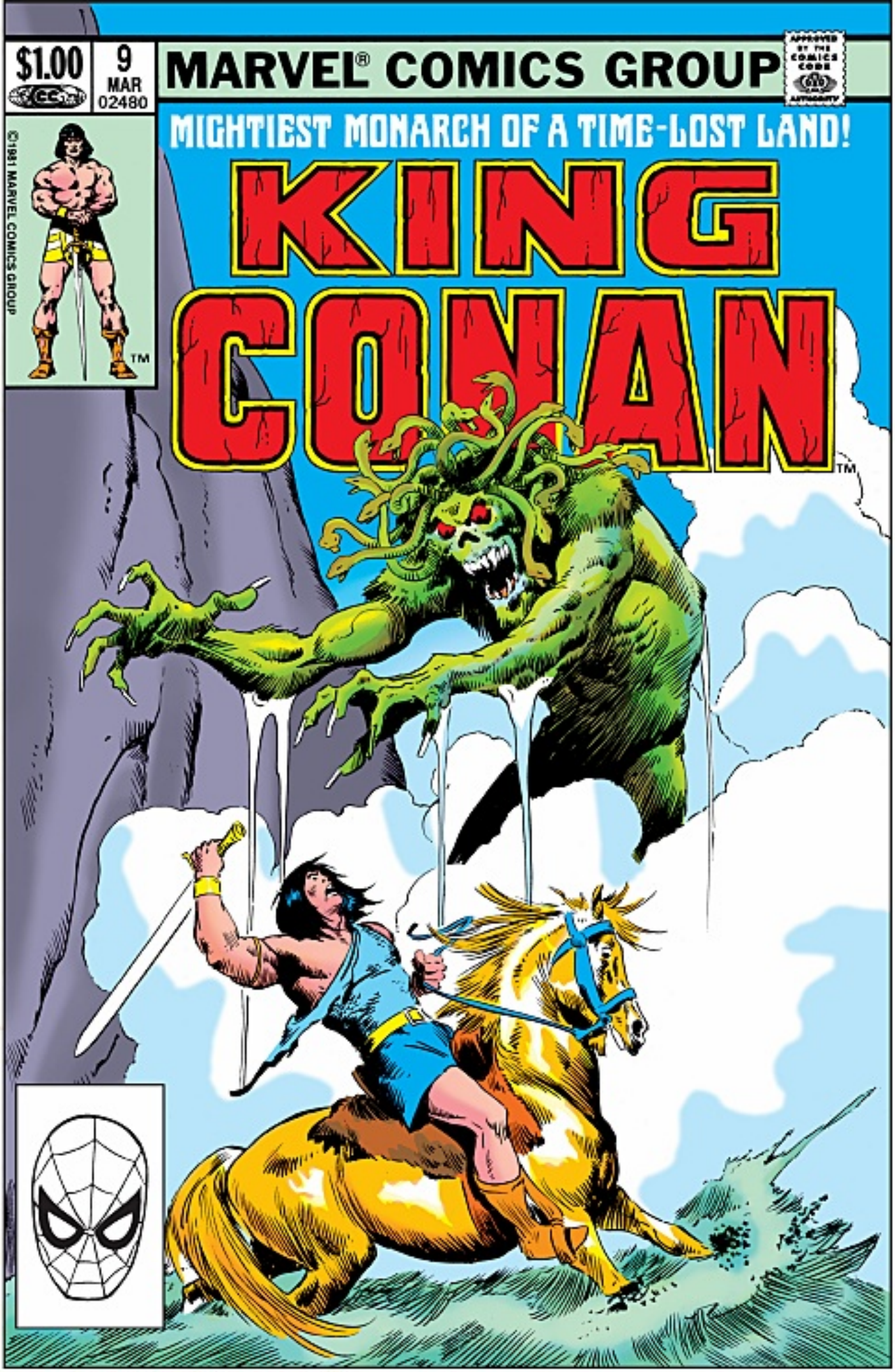
"Kal of Cal"
Kaiani Lee
2744 Willow Place
South Gate, CA 90280

And here's a sensational sixteen-word salute to our sensational Cimmerian readers: As long as there are loyal legions of you out there, the King will live forever!

A HYBORIAN PIN-UP GALLERY

A HYBORIAN PIN-UP GALLERY

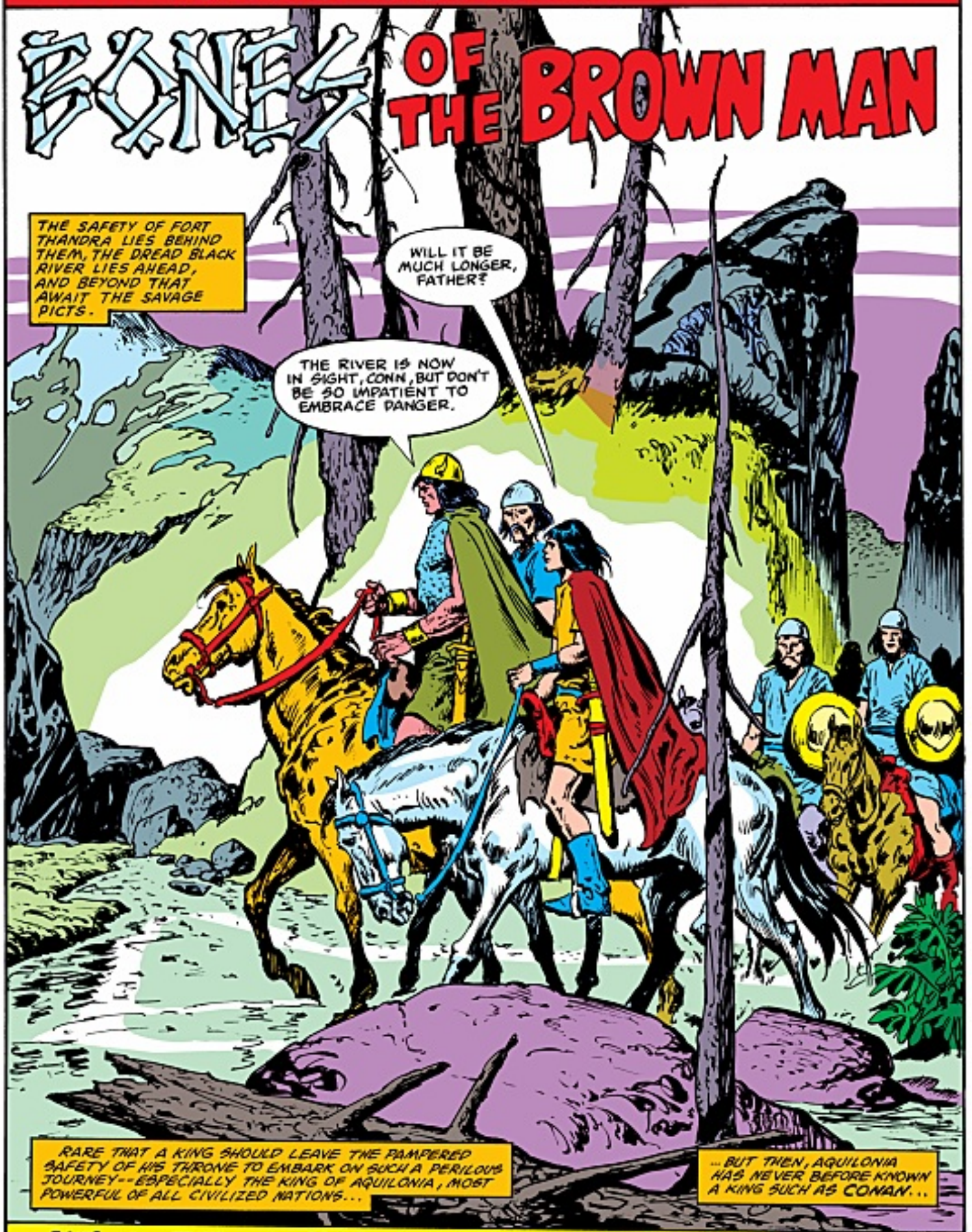
A HYBORIAN PIN-UP GALLERY
COMBAT IN A
TIME-LOST LAND!



COVER PENCILER & INKER: JOHN BUSCEMA

Stan Lee PRESENTS: KING CONAN
Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD

BONES OF THE BROWN MAN



DOUG MOENCH WRITER * JOHN BUSCEMA ARTIST * ERNIE CHAN INKER * JANICE CHIANG LETTERER * GEORGE ROUSSOS COLORIST * LOUISE JONES EDITOR * JIM SHOOTER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

THAT A KING SHOULD ACT AS HIS OWN AMBASSADOR IS UNUSUAL -- BUT EVEN MORE UNCOMMON IS THE PRESENCE OF THE KING'S YOUNG SON AND HEIR. IT IS COUNT TROCERO WHO FINALLY BROACHES THE SUBJECT...

I'VE LEARNED TO TRUST YOUR *INSTINCTS*, MY KING, BUT I WONDER NOW ABOUT THE *WISDOM* OF THIS UNDERTAKING...

MAINTAINING PEACE WITH THE PICTS IS VITAL, TROCERO.

SHOULD THEY EVER OVERRUN AQUILONIA, ITS THRONE WON'T BE WORTH A DROP OF CROM'S SPIT.

I BROUGHT YOUNG CONN ALONG TO WITNESS THIS PARLEY FOR HIMSELF, AND LEARN THE FINER POINTS OF DIPLOMACY FIRSTHAND.

AND CONN SWELLS WITH PRIDE AS TROCERO MERELY LOOKS ON IN GLOOM...

...A DARK MOOD WHICH LATER DEEPENS, AS THEY CROSS THE BLACK RIVER...

I'VE NEVER LIKED THIS SERPENTINE LENGTH OF WATER, CONAN -- INDEED THEY SAY ITS DARKLY RUNNING DEPTHS NURTURE DEVILS, DEMONS, MONSTERS, AND WORSE.

CONAN'S BARBARIAN SOUL, TOO BRIDLES AT IMMERSION IN THE RIVER AND AT THE MEMORIES OF BATTLES FOUGHT ALONG ITS BANKS... BUT THAT WAS LONG AGO, IN MORE SAVAGE TIMES, AND HE SAYS NOTHING.

I'D FEEL BETTER, CONAN WERE WE ESCORTED BY YOUR ELITE GUARD -- THE IRON LEGION'S BLACK DRAGONS.

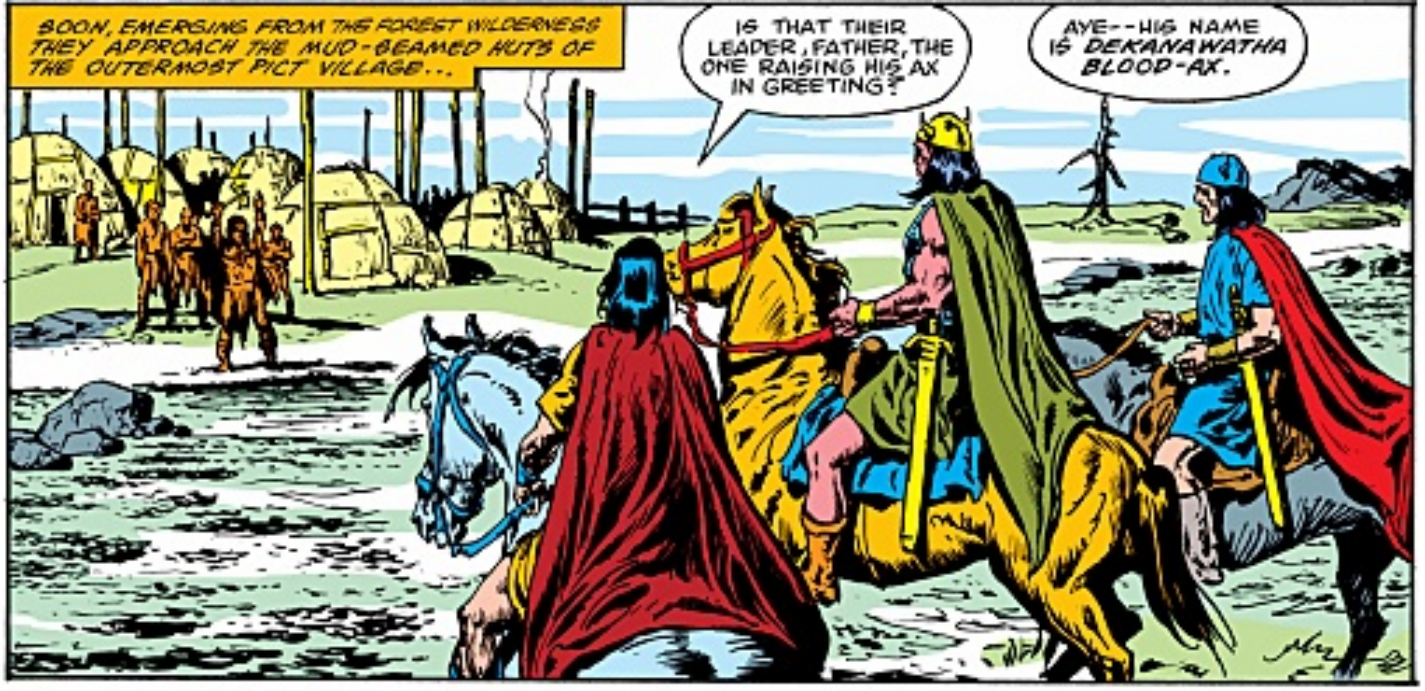
A LARGE PARTY WOULD CAUSE THE PICTS TO QUESTION OUR INTENTIONS. THEY WATCH US EVEN NOW, PEERING FROM A DOZEN PLACES OF CONCEALMENT ALONG THE BANKS.

AYE, THEY'RE SILENT, SLIPPERY DEVILS.

AND AS THE SMALL GROUP FALLS QUIET, ALL EYES SEARCHING THE OPPOSITE BANK, CONAN TURNS TO HIS SON...

BUT WE COME AS DIPLOMATS, NOT WARRIORS, AND DIPLOMACY IS THE FINE ART OF PEACEFUL COMPROMISE.

REMEMBER THAT, CONN, ON THE DAY *YOU* BECOME KING.


SOON, EMERGING FROM THE FOREST WILDERNESS THEY APPROACH THE MUD-BEAMED HUTS OF THE OUTERMOST PICT VILLAGE...
IS THAT THEIR LEADER, FATHER, THE ONE RAISING HIS AX IN GREETING?
AYE--HIS NAME IS DEKANAWATHA BLOOD-AX.

WELCOME, CONAN. YOUR SON, O KING, GROWS MUCH AS MY SON AKENAK--BOTH STRONG BEYOND THEIR YEARS..

...AND BOTH READY FOR MANHOOD.
AYE, DEKANAWATHA--CONN IS A STOUT LAD AND WORTHY OF THE PRIDE I TAKE IN HIM.
I KNOW. MY OWN PRIDE IN AKENAK FLOWS LIKE THE RIVER.

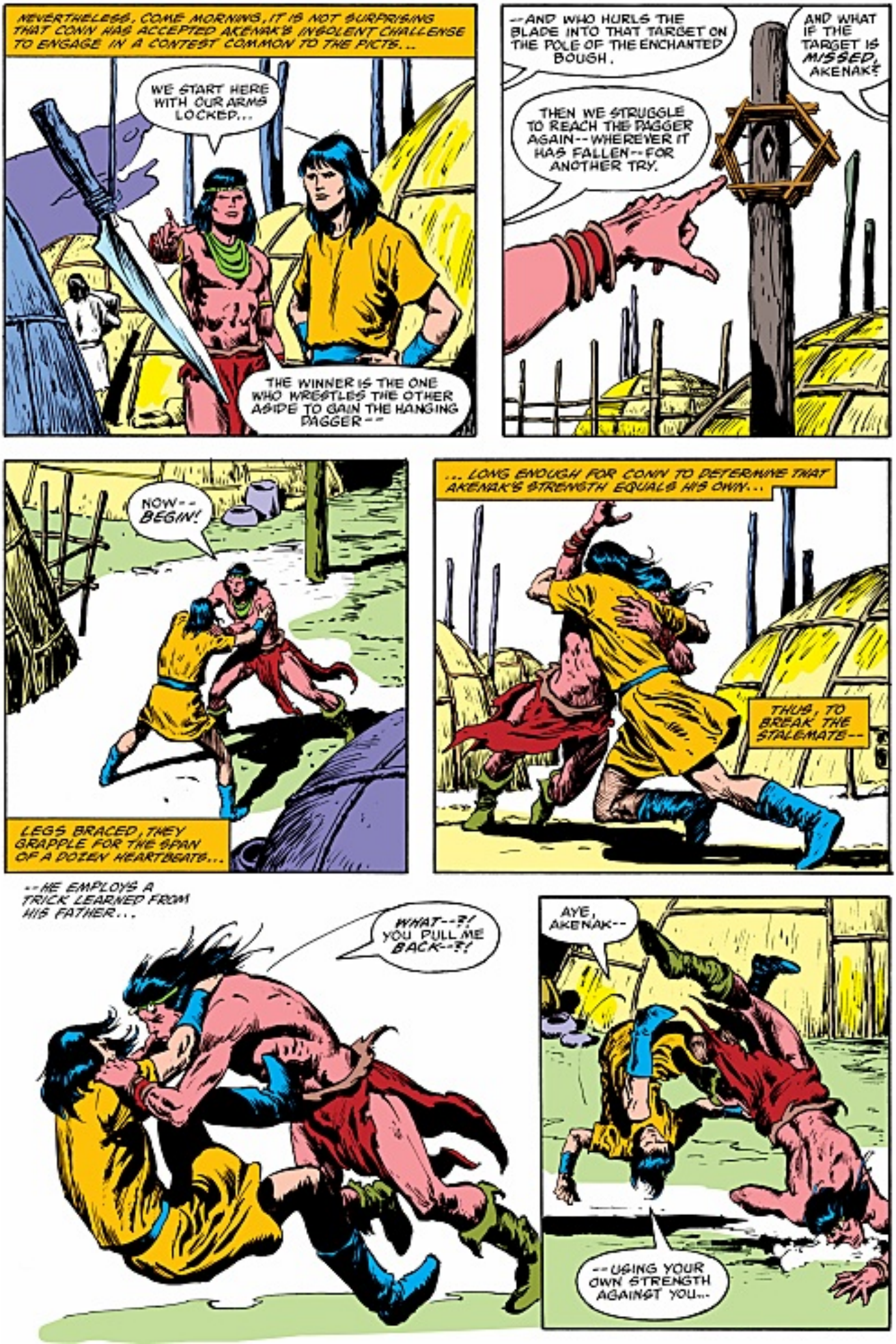
DURING A LONG PAUSE, THE TWO YOUTHS EXCHANGE STARES, EACH SENSING IN THE OTHER A FUTURE ENEMY.

LONG HOURS LATER...
WE NEED YOUR PERMISSION FOR OCCASIONAL HUNTING FORAYS ACROSS THE BLACK RIVER INTO THE MARSHES, WITHOUT FEAR OF REPRISAL FROM YOUR BOSSONIAN ARCHERS OR OTHER AQUILONIAN PATROLS.
WE ARE AT PEACE NOW, CONAN--NO NEED TO MAINTAIN THE BORDER SO STIFFLY. AFTER ALL, THE NATURE OF THE RIVER ITSELF IS FLUID--
--AND OUR FOOD-GAME HARDLY RECOGNIZES IT AS AN UNCROSSABLE BORDER.

I AGREE IN PRINCIPLE, DEKANAWATHA, BUT I WANT LIMITS ON THE DISTANCE OF ANY SUCH INCURSION AND ON THE NUMBER IN ANY HUNTING PARTY...
...AND ASSURANCES, TOO, THAT YOUR PICTS WILL NOT GO NEAR ANY SETTLEMENTS OR FORTS.
IF THEY DO, YOU MUST ACCEPT THE FACT THAT THEY WILL BE SLAIN ON SIGHT.
LIKE MAD-DOGS, BARBARIAN-KING?
LIKE POTENTIAL RAIDERS, BLOOD-AX!
NOW TRY MY PATIENCE NO FURTHER OR BY MITRA--
YOUR PATIENCE, BARBARIAN? ARE YOU NOT THE ONE WHOSE HASTY CONQUEST OF SURROUNDING STATES HAS--
HAVE CARE, PICT, LEST I--
NO, FATHER! THIS PARLEY WAS TO BE A LESSON IN DIPLOMACY NOT WAR!
AND AS YOU POINTED OUT, DIPLOMACY IS THE FINE ART OF PEACEFUL COMPROMISE.
HOW DOES THIS SOUND?--
--IF THE NUMBER OF PICT HUNTERS IS LIMITED TO LESS THAN TEN, THEY MAY PURSUE THEIR GAME WHEREVER IT MAY FLEE WITH THE ASSURANCE THAT OUR ARCHERS WILL DRAW NO BOW AGAINST THEM.
BOTH MEN SLOWLY SHED THEIR GRIM MASKS TO SMILE FAINTLY, FEELING HUMBLED AND SLIGHTLY LUDICROUS.
THE WISDOM OF BABES...

IF CONN IS THE STRONG LUSTY FRUIT OF HIS OWN BARBARIAN LOINS, MUSES CONAN, SO TOO IS HE HIS MOTHER'S SON, SHARING MORE THAN A LITTLE OF QUEEN ZENOBIA'S MORE REFINED TRAITS...
IS THAT AGREEABLE TO BOTH SIDES?
IT IS AGREEABLE--AT LEAST TO MY SIDE.
AYE--THAT SNAKE OF WATER IS EVIL ENOUGH, WITHOUT OUR LETTING ANY HUNTER PURSUING HIS QUARRY ACROSS IT START A NEW WAR!
GOOD--AND NOW, CONAN YOU ARE INVITED TO STAY THE NIGHT AND WITNESS TOMORROW'S SACRED RITE.
WHAT RITE, DEKANAWATHA?
THE RITE OF MANHOOD. TOMORROW MY SON MAKES HIS PASSAGE.
AK@NAK'S CHEST SWELLS WITH PRIDE, AS CONN LOOKS ON ENVIOUSLY...
WE ACCEPT, DEKANAWATHA.
CONN SHOULD FIND IT INTERESTING.
BUT CONN SEEMS STRANGELY SILENT, AND SUBDUED...
...THOUGH TROCERO HAS MUCH TO SAY...
I LIKE IT NOT, CONAN, SPENDING THE NIGHT IN THE VERY MIDST OF THESE DEVILS.'
WOULD YOU RATHER CROSS THAT THRICE-CURSED RIVER IN THE DARK, TROCERO?
AND TROCERO STOPS SHORT, BENUMBED BY THE THOUGHT.

N-NO, MY KING... NOT IN THE DARK.
THEN CHOOSE A HUT NEAR THE FIRE--AND KEEP A HAND NEAR YOUR SWORD.
SLEEP WELL, TROCERO.
WHETHER THE POITANIAN COUNT SLEEPS WELL OR NOT IS A MOOT POINT...
BUT AS FOR YOUNG CONN--
--HIS SLUMBERS ARE FITFUL AND PLAGUED BY DARKLING DREAMS...
HE HAS BECOME KING THOUGH HE IS STILL A YOUTH--AND THOUGH HIS FOE, AKENAK, HAS GROWN TO FULL SIZE, BRAWNY AND SNEERING.
SUCH IS THE IMPERFECT LOGIC OF DREAMS.
AYE, AND OF SHRILL NIGHTMARES.
N-NO--!
NOOO!!
MITRA! WHAT IS IT, CONN?
THE TERROR STILL CLINGS TO HIM, MUCH LIKE THE SWEAT-MATTED HAIR ON HIS FEVERED BROW, BUT THE STARK ILLUSION ITSELF FADES...
N-NOTHING, MY FATHER. THERE IS NO DANGER. THE ONLY ENEMY IS...
...MYSELF.


NEVERTHELESS, COME MORNING, IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT CONN HAS ACCEPTED AKENAK'S INSOLENT CHALLENGE TO ENGAGE IN A CONTEST COMMON TO THE PICTS...
WE START HERE WITH OUR ARMS LOCKED...
THE WINNER IS THE ONE WHO WRESTLES THE OTHER ASIDE TO GAIN THE HANGING DAGGER--
--AND WHO HURLS THE BLADE INTO THAT TARGET ON THE POLE OF THE ENCHANTED BOUGH.
AND WHAT IF THE TARGET IS MISSED, AKENAK?
THEN WE STRUGGLE TO REACH THE DAGGER AGAIN--WHEREVER IT HAS FALLEN--FOR ANOTHER TRY.
NOW--BEGIN!
LEGS BRACED, THEY GRAPPLE FOR THE SPAN OF A DOZEN HEARTBEATS...
... LONG ENOUGH FOR CONN TO DETERMINE THAT AKENAK'S STRENGTH EQUALS HIS OWN...
THUS, TO BREAK THE STALEMATE--
--HE EMPLOYS A TRICK LEARNED FROM HIS FATHER...
WHAT--?! YOU PULL ME BACK--?!
AYE, AKENAK--
--USING YOUR OWN STRENGTH AGAINST YOU...

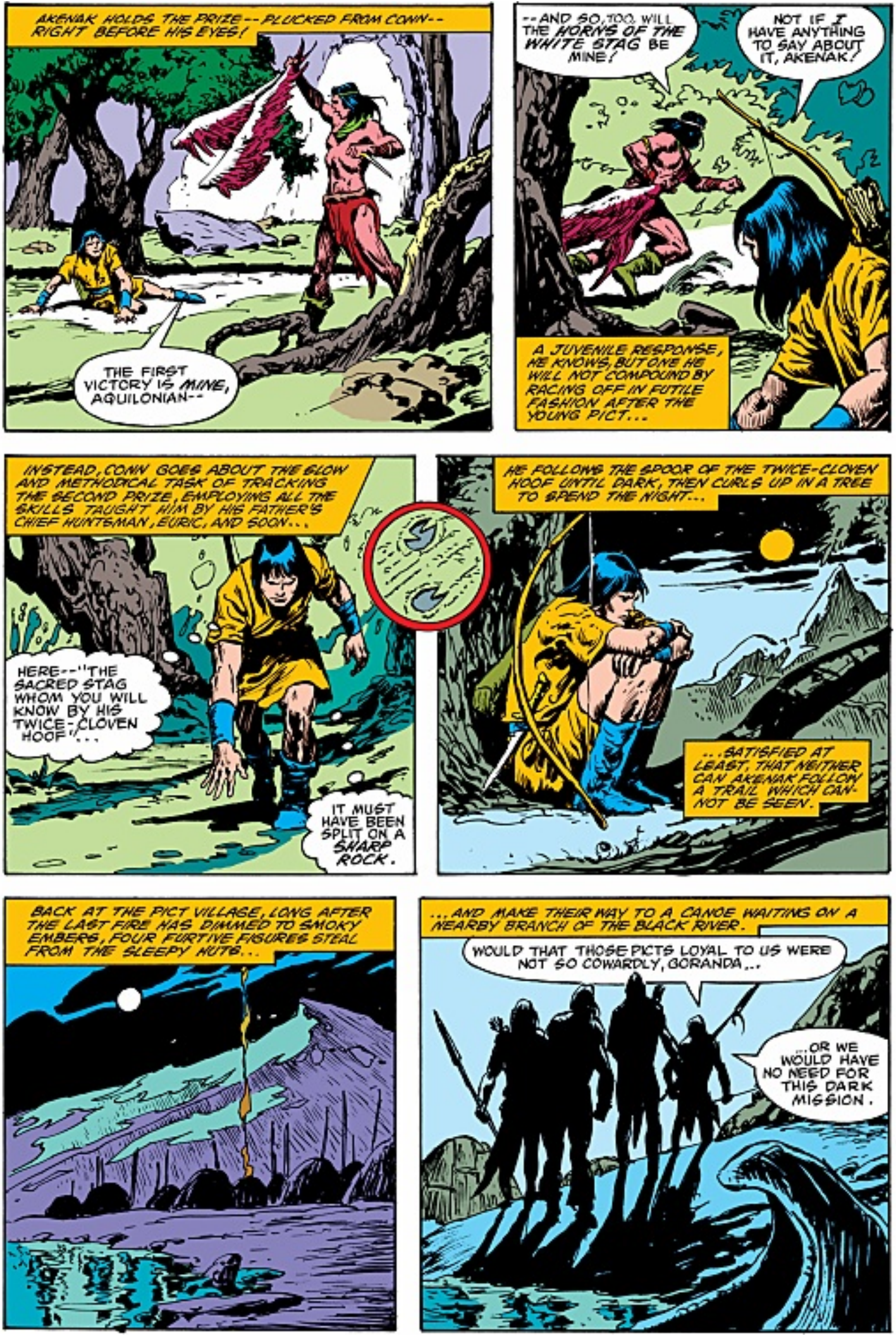
... TO HURL YOU FAR FROM THE--
--DAGGER!
AND NOW, THE CONTEST IS ABOUT TO--
--UHN!
WH-WHAT--?
YOU SPOILED MY AIM!
YES, AQUILONIAN-- HURLING YOU FAR FROM BOTH DAGGER AND POLE!
AND NOW, AS YOU STARTED TO SAY...
THE CONTEST IS ENDED!

BUT I... I DIDN'T KNOW YOU COULD--
DO YOU SEEK TO HIDE BEHIND UNFAMILIARITY WITH THE CONTEST--
--OR WILL YOU ACCEPT DEFEAT LIKE A MAN!
I... I ACCEPT DEFEAT.
AYE, THOUGH HIS EARS BURN WITH SHAME.
AKENAK! WILL YOU SPEND ALL YOUR STRENGTH IN FOOLISH GAMES BEFORE THE RITE EVEN BEGINS?
COME-- GORANDA ZEK PREPARES THE CEREMONY EVEN NOW!
GORANDA ZEK? I THOUGHT THE DRUID DIVIATIX WAS YOUR PRIEST...
DIVIATIX HAD A VISION DURING THE NIGHT OF THE LAST RED MOON, FRIEND CONAN...
...AND HAS BEEN GONE THIS PAST MONTH, FOLLOWING THE DICTATES OF HIS INNER SIGHT.
DURING HIS ABSENCE, GORANDA ZEK SERVES AS OUR SHAMAN--AND IT IS HE WHO HAS DEVISED AKENAK'S RITE OF PASSAGE.
TAKE YOUR PLACE, MY SON, AS GORANDA EXPLAINS YOUR RITE...
THE TESTS OF MANHOOD FOR A CHIEFTAIN'S SON ARE THREE, AND MORE DIFFICULT THAN THOSE FOR OTHER YOUTHS.
YOU MUST FIND, GAIN, AND RETURN WITH THREE PRIZES.
FIRST, THE WINGS OF AN EAGLE.
SECOND, THE HORNS OF A SACRED STAG, WHOM YOU WILL KNOW FIRST BY HIS TWICE-CLOVEN HOOF AND LATER BY HIS COAT OF WHITE.
AND THREE...
...THE TWO REMAINING BONES OF YOUR ANCESTOR WHO DID SLAY THE VERY SPIRIT OF THE RIVER...
...LOCATED IN A GROTTO SHRINE HALF A DAY'S MARCH DOWNRIVER!

AND KNOW, AKENAK, SON OF DEKANAWATHA BLOOD-AX, THAT SHOULD YOU FAIL IN ANY ONE OF THESE THREE TESTS...
...YOUR MANHOOD SHALL BE DENIED.
OLD WOMEN SHALL SPIT UPON YOUR FACE AND DARK BIRDS SHALL FOLLOW YOUR SHADOW FOREVER!
I DID NOT SUSPECT THE SHAMAN WOULD DEVISE SUCH A DIFFICULT TRIAL, CONAN. IT COULD TAKE DAYS TO COMPLETE.
PERHAPS YOU SHOULD LEAVE NOW...
AYE, DEKANAWATHA, THERE ARE MATTERS IN TARANTIA WHICH--
NO!
I WISH TO STAY, FATHER. I... I WISH TO TAKE THIS TEST OF MANHOOD MYSELF! TO PROVE MYSELF WORTHY OF FUTURE REIGN!
THIS IS A PICTISH RITE, MY SON, NOT--
IT COULD BE STAGED AS A RACE, AQUILONIAN, PITTING THE TWO YOUTHS AGAINST EACH OTHER AS WELL AS AGAINST THE THREE TESTS.
THE FIRST TWO PRIZES, EAGLE'S WINGS AND STAG'S ANTLER'S, MUST BE GAINED FIRST, BUT HE WHO FAILS TO GAIN THE BONES FORFEITS ALL THE PRIZES TO THE OTHER.
IT IS AGREEABLE TO ME... IF CONN'S FATHER WILL PERMIT IT...
THOUGH KING, CONAN IS YET A BARBARIAN AT HEART, CLOSER TO THE SAVAGE PICTS THAN TO THE REFINED NOBLES IN THE COURTS OF TARANTIA, AND THE NOTION OF SUCH A TEST APPEALS TO HIS HOT BLOOD AND LUSTY HEART.
AYE, HE REMEMBERS WHEN HE, AS A YOUTH IN CIMMERIA, PROVED HIS OWN MANHOOD BY BREAKING THE NECK OF A STRONG BULL WITH HIS BARE HANDS...

HE REMEMBERS, TOO, THE THRILL OF THE KILL, AND THE FEELING OF POWER DERIVED FROM IT, AND SINCE AQUILONIA'S CIVILIZED SOCIETY HAS NO ROOM FOR SUCH AN ELEMENTAL RITE...
VERY WELL, CONN, I WILL PERMIT IT.
AND, AS CONN SELECTS HIS WEAPONS, AKIYAK SNEERS IN HAUGHTY DISDAIN...
HAH! I NEED ONLY A KNIFE!
YOU HAVE TAUGHT ME TO TAKE ONLY WHAT I NEED, FATHER, BUT ALSO TO BE PREPARED WITH THE PROPER WEAPON OR TOOL.
SHOULD THE BOW PROVE A HINDRANCE, I SHALL SIMPLY DISCARD IT.
AND CONAN SMILES.
WITH THE PREPARATIONS CONCLUDED, THE SHAMAN GORANDA ZEK POINTS HIS FETISH INTO THE DENSE FOREST...
BEGIN--BY SEEKING THE WINGS OF AN EAGLE!
ARE YOU CERTAIN THIS IS WISE, CONAN? AFTER ALL, CONN IS THE HEIR TO THE THRONE AND--
CEASE YOUR WORRIES FOR TEN HEARTBEATS, AT LEAST, TROCERO.
THE BOY HAS MADE HIS CHOICE. WE WILL AWAIT ITS OUTCOME HERE AND, FROM WILLING, HE WILL RETURN A MAN.
HOURS LATER, DEEP IN THE FOREST NEAR THE BLACK RIVER, CONN'S SHARP EYES HAVE SELECTED A LIKELY CLIFF.
HE SCALES IT WITH THE SWIFT SURENESS AND AGILITY OF YOUTH...

...AND IS REWARDED BY THE SIGHT AND SOUNDS OF A WINDSWEPT AERYIE...
...AND WITHIN IT, TWO SQUALLING EAGLETS AND THE MOTHER--
--RETURNING TO FEED HER YOUNG.
THE FIRST PRIZE IS WITHIN REACH OF A SINGLE LUNGE...
BUT AT THE LAST SECOND, KNIFE HELD HIGH, HE SEES A VIVID IMAGE OF THE TWO YOUNG, ALONE AND FORLORN, LISTLESSLY STARVING IN SLOW DEATH...
IT IS MORE THAN ENOUGH TO STAY HIS BLADE.
THE EAGLE BUCKS--
-- STRAINING TO BEAT ITS PINIONS AGAINST THE WEIGHT OF THE RELUCTANT KILLER ON ITS BACK.
BOTH PLUMMET--
-- AND CRASH, IN A FLURRY OF FEATHERS AND LEAVES, THROUGH THE THICK CANOPY OF TREES.
IT IS ENOUGH TO BREAK THE FALL...
...BUT--
MY THANKS, AQUILONIAN, FOR MAKING THE TASK SO EASY.
NO--!!


AKENAK HOLDS THE PRIZE--PLUCKED FROM CONN--RIGHT BEFORE HIS EYES!
THE FIRST VICTORY IS MINE, AQUILONIAN--
--AND SO, TOO, WILL THE HORNS OF THE WHITE STAG BE MINE!
NOT IF I HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY ABOUT IT, AKENAK!
A JUVENILE RESPONSE, HE KNOWS, BUT ONE HE WILL NOT COMPOUND BY RACING OFF IN FUTILE FASHION AFTER THE YOUNG PICT...
INSTEAD, CONN GOES ABOUT THE SLOW AND METHODICAL TASK OF TRACKING THE SECOND PRIZE, EMPLOYING ALL THE SKILLS TAUGHT HIM BY HIS FATHER'S CHIEF HUNTSMAN, EURIC, AND SOON...
HERE--"THE SACRED STAG WHOM YOU WILL KNOW BY HIS TWICE-CLOVEN HOOF..."
IT MUST HAVE BEEN SPLIT ON A SHARP ROCK.
HE FOLLOWS THE SPOOR OF THE TWICE-CLOVEN HOOF UNTIL DARK, THEN CURLS UP IN A TREE TO SPEND THE NIGHT...
...SATISFIED AT LEAST, THAT NEITHER CAN AKENAK FOLLOW A TRAIL WHICH CANNOT BE SEEN.
BACK AT THE PICT VILLAGE, LONG AFTER THE LAST FIRE HAS DIMMED TO SMOKY EMBERS, FOUR FURTIVE FIGURES STEAL FROM THE SLEEPY HUTS...
...AND MAKE THEIR WAY TO A CANOE WAITING ON A NEARBY BRANCH OF THE BLACK RIVER.
WOULD THAT THOSE PICTS LOYAL TO US WERE NOT SO COWARDLY, GORANDA...
...OR WE WOULD HAVE NO NEED FOR THIS DARK MISSION.

INDEED, WE COULD RISE UP AGAINST DEKANAWATHA BLOOD-AX EVEN NOW.
TRUE--BUT THERE ARE ENOUGH WITH COURAGE, AT LEAST, TO SERVE OUR MISSION, AND ONCE THE MISSION SUCCEEDS, THEY WILL ALL STAND BEHIND ME. NO TRUE PICT CARES FOR DEKANAWATHA'S APPEASEMENT OF THE AQUILONIANS.
BUT HOW CAN YOU BE SURE THE MISSION WILL SUCCEED, GORANDA?
IT CANNOT FAIL BY ITS NATURE--IT CAN ONLY SUCCEED BY VARYING DEGREES.

FIRST, SHOULD THE YOUTHS FAIL AT THE GROTTO, ONE OR BOTH WILL DIE--AND THOUGH ONLY IN A SLIGHT WAY, THE LOSS OF EITHER HEIR STILL SERVES OUR ENDS. SECOND, SHOULD THEY SUCCEED IN WHAT WE CANNOT--IN GAINING THE BONES OF THE BROWN MAN--
--THEN BOTH THEY AND THE BONES WILL FALL INTO OUR POSSESSION.

SUCH PRIZES--HOSTAGES AND FETISHES--MAY WORK MIRACLES.
THIRD, WITH THE BONES OF THE BROWN MAN, I WILL HAVE THE POWER TO ENCOMPASS THE DEATHS OF CONAN AND DEKANAWATHA. THEN SHALL THE PICTISH HORDES RALLY TO MY CRY--LOOTING AND BURNING THE PALACES OF AQUILONIA.
NOW STROKE HARDER--WE MUST REACH THE GROTTO-SHRINE BEFORE DAWN!

THE MORNING IS COOL, SPARKLING, AND DEW-FRESH.
HIS MUSCLES WARMING UNDER THE NEW SUN, CONN SWINGS DOWN TO THE TWICE-CLOVEN TRAIL...

...AND, BY MIDDAY, THAT TRAIL ENDS.
THE STAG IS INDEED WHITE...
...INDEED MAGNIFICENT.

AND THIS TIME, NO INNOCENT YOUNG DISTRACT HIM FROM THE TASK...
...NOTHING CAUSES HIS AIM TO WAVER OR ERODES HIS RESOLVE...
...NOTHING PREVENTS HIM FROM--
HAAAI!!
AKENAK! NOT AGAIN!
NO--THIS TIME IT IS THE PICT WHO IS THROWN BY THE PANICKING PRIZE...
AND AS THE WHITE STAG BOLTS--
--CONN'S AIM IS TRUE.
THE SECOND PRIZE IS YOURS, AGUILONIAN, BUT REMEMBER...
HE WHO GAINS THE FINAL PRIZE FORCES THE OTHER TO FORFEIT ALL.
BY TOMORROW I SHALL BE A MAN--
--AND YOU STILL A MERE PUP, FOLLOWING ME BACK TO THE VILLAGE WITH YOUR TAIL BETWEEN YOUR LEGS!
AND AKENAK DASHES FOR THE RIVER AS CONN STRUGGLES TO REMOVE THE STAG'S ANTLERS..
THE FINAL RACE HAS BEGUN.

BY MID-AFTERNOON, CONN HAS LONG SINCE ABANDONED HIS BOW IN THE THICK BRUSH OF THE FOREST--

--AND NOW RACING ALONG THE ROCKY BANK OF THE RIVER, HE WISHES HE COULD DISCARD THE AWKWARD ANTLERS AS WELL.

THE RACE IS EVEN THROUGHOUT THE LONG DAY, WITH AKENAK MAINTAINING THE SAME TWENTY-PACE HEADSTART.

SOON THE RUNNING ITSELF BECOMES A THING WITHOUT EFFORT, SOMETHING FOR THE LEGS TO DO BETWEEN EACH DEEP REGULARLY SPACED DRAUGHT OF AIR--AND STILL THEY RUN, NEITHER FALTERING...

...UNTIL IT SEEMS THE REST OF THEIR LIVES WILL BE SPENT THIS WAY.

BUT FINALLY, AT TWILIGHT, CONN HALTS AT WHAT CAN ONLY BE THE GROTTO--

--IN TIME TO SEE AKENAK ALREADY APPROACHING THE EERIE, SHADOW-SHROUDED ENTRANCE.

IT IS OVER, THEN.

TRY AS HE DID, UNTIL HIS LUNGS NEARED BURSTING, HE COULD NOT MAKE UP THE SLIGHT HEADSTART...

STILL, THERE CAN BE NO STOPPING NOW...

IF HE IS TO BE TRULY A MAN, HE MUST SEE THIS CONTEST TO ITS END.

BUT INSIDE, BEFORE HIS EYES CAN ADJUST TO THE THICK GLOOM, HE FINDS NOTHING BUT THE STILL FORM OF HIS OPPONENT... AS IF FROZEN IN FEAR...

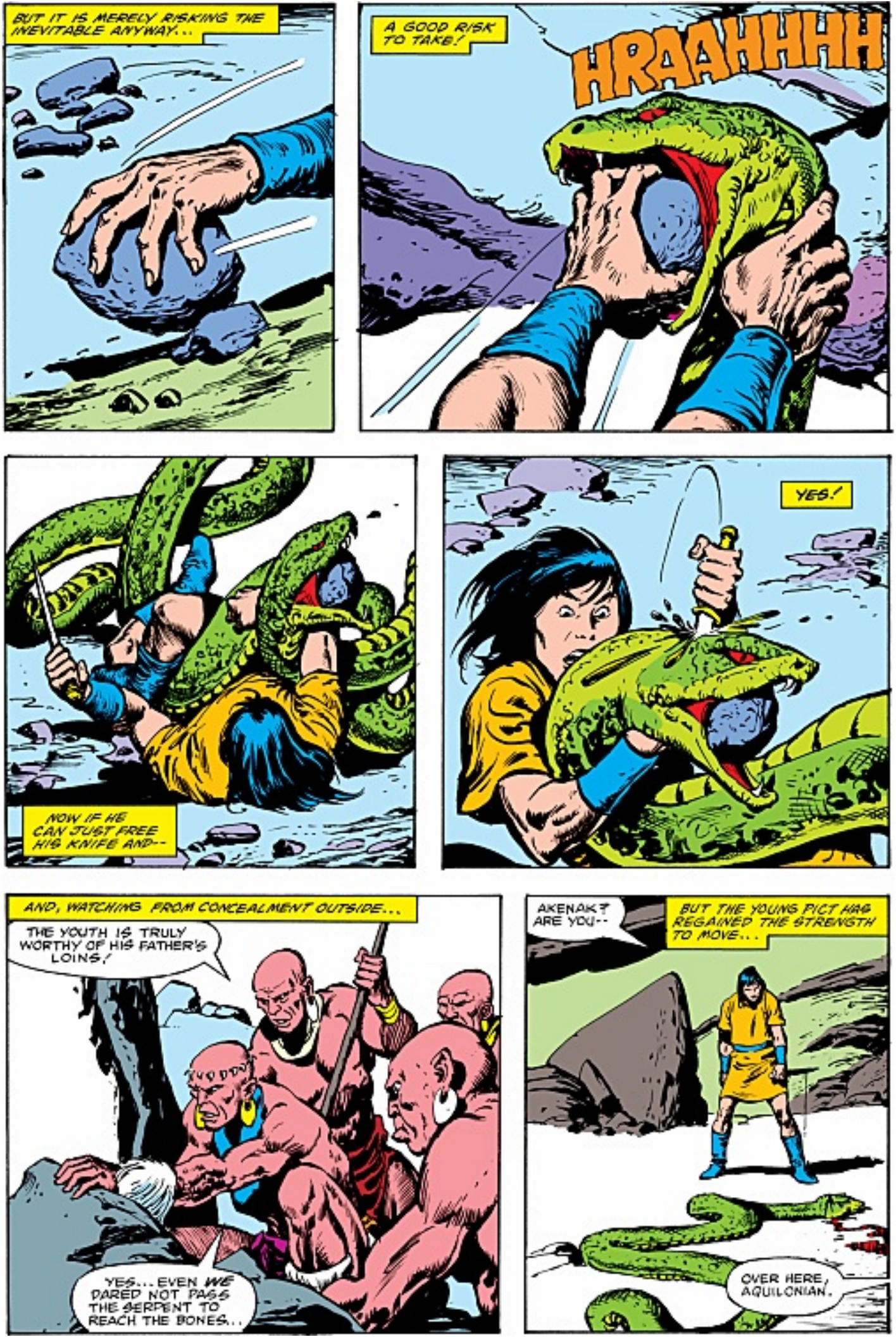
WHAT? WHAT IS IT, AKENAK? WHY ARE YOU--

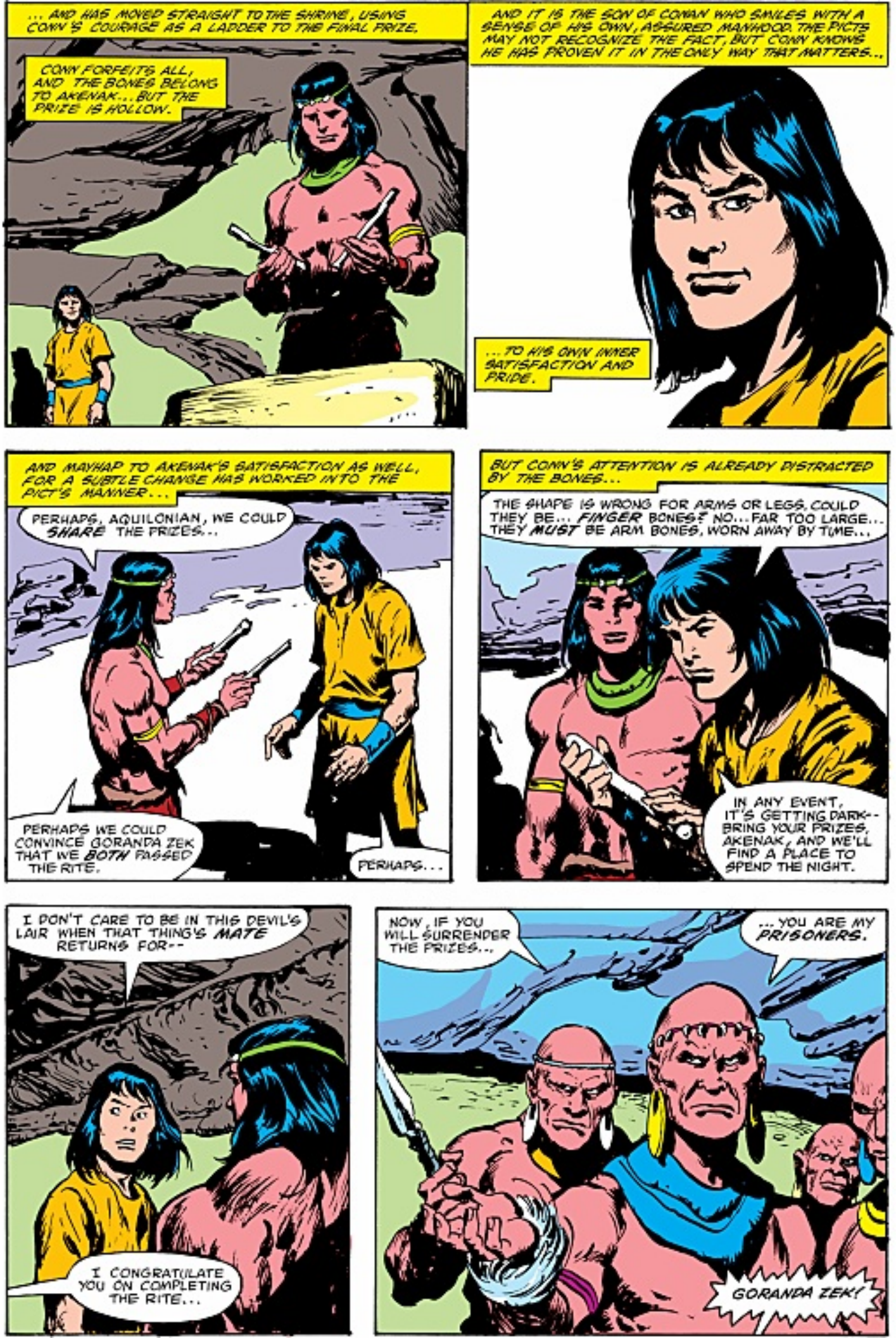
HSSSS

THEN CONN SEES IT TOO, LOOMING UP BEFORE THEM-- BLOCKING THE WAY TO THE TWO BONES LAID ON A NATURAL ROCK SHRINE.
HSSSS
ITS NETHER COILS FLOW OUTWARD IN SMOOTH UNDULATIONS, RAISING THE HEAD HIGHER AND HIGHER IN HIDEOUS HORROR...
THE SHRINE, THEN HAS A GUARDIAN WHICH GORANDA ZEK FAILED TO MENTION.
MOVE, AKENAK! MOVE, CURSE YOU-- BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!

BUT AS THE HUGE SERPENT PREPARES TO STRIKE, IT IS CLEAR THAT AKENAK IS HOPELESSLY TRANSFIXED...
THE YOUNG PICT CANNOT MOVE--

-- AND SO IT IS UP TO CONN TO DO SO!
THE SNAKE WHIPS AND THRASHES WITH A STRENGTH THRICE HIS OWN, AND HE KNOWS THE CONTEST WILL BE A BRIEF ONE...
HE WILL LOSE TO THE SERPENT, YES, BUT ONLY AFTER DEFEATING HIS OWN FEAR...
WAIT! ONE OF THE LARGE ROCKS ON THE GROTTO FLOOR--!
A SMALL CHANCE AT BEST, AND IF HE RELEASES ONE OF HIS ARMS-- THE FATAL STRIKE WILL COME ALL THE SOONER.


BUT IT IS MERELY RISKING THE INEVITABLE ANYWAY...
A GOOD RISK TO TAKE!
HRAAHHHH
NOW IF HE CAN JUST FREE HIS KNIFE AND--
YES!
AND, WATCHING FROM CONCEALMENT OUTSIDE...
THE YOUTH IS TRULY WORTHY OF HIS FATHER'S LOINS!
YES... EVEN WE DARED NOT PASS THE SERPENT TO REACH THE BONES...
AKENAK? ARE YOU--
BUT THE YOUNG PICT HAS REGAINED THE STRENGTH TO MOVE...
OVER HERE, AQUILONIAN.


... AND HAS MOVED STRAIGHT TO THE SHRINE, USING CONN'S COURAGE AS A LADDER TO THE FINAL PRIZE.
CONN FORFEITS ALL, AND THE BONES BELONG TO AKENAK... BUT THE PRIZE IS HOLLOW.
AND IT IS THE SON OF CONAN WHO SMILES WITH A SENSE OF HIS OWN, ASSURED MANHOOD. THE PICTS MAY NOT RECOGNIZE THE FACT, BUT CONN KNOWS HE HAS PROVEN IT IN THE ONLY WAY THAT MATTERS...
...TO HIS OWN INNER SATISFACTION AND PRIDE.
AND MAYHAP TO AKENAK'S SATISFACTION AS WELL, FOR A SUBTLE CHANGE HAS WORKED INTO THE PICT'S MANNER...
PERHAPS, AQUILONIAN, WE COULD SHARE THE PRIZES...
PERHAPS WE COULD CONVINCE GORANDA ZEK THAT WE BOTH PASSED THE RITE.
PERHAPS...
BUT CONN'S ATTENTION IS ALREADY DISTRACTED BY THE BONES...
THE SHAPE IS WRONG FOR ARMS OR LEGS. COULD THEY BE... FINGER BONES? NO... FAR TOO LARGE... THEY MUST BE ARM BONES, WORN AWAY BY TIME...
IN ANY EVENT, IT'S GETTING DARK-- BRING YOUR PRIZES, AKENAK, AND WE'LL FIND A PLACE TO SPEND THE NIGHT.
I DON'T CARE TO BE IN THIS DEVIL'S LAIR WHEN THAT THING'S MATE RETURNS FOR--
I CONGRATULATE YOU ON COMPLETING THE RITE...
NOW, IF YOU WILL SURRENDER THE PRIZES...
...YOU ARE MY PRISONERS.
GORANDA ZEK!

A TRAP--THE WHOLE RITE OF PASSAGE WAS A TRAP! YOU SHALL PAY FOR THIS TREACHERY, GORANDA ZEK, WHEN MY FATHER LEARNS OF IT.
I THINK NOT, BOY.
NOW THAT I HAVE THE BONES--THE FETISHES TO BE A SHAMAN IN MORE THAN MERE NAME, TO WORK TRUE MAGICKS...

...DEKANAWATHA BLOOD-AX WILL DIE LONG ERE HE DISCOVERS YOUR FATE--
--AS WILL CONAN OF AQUILONIA.

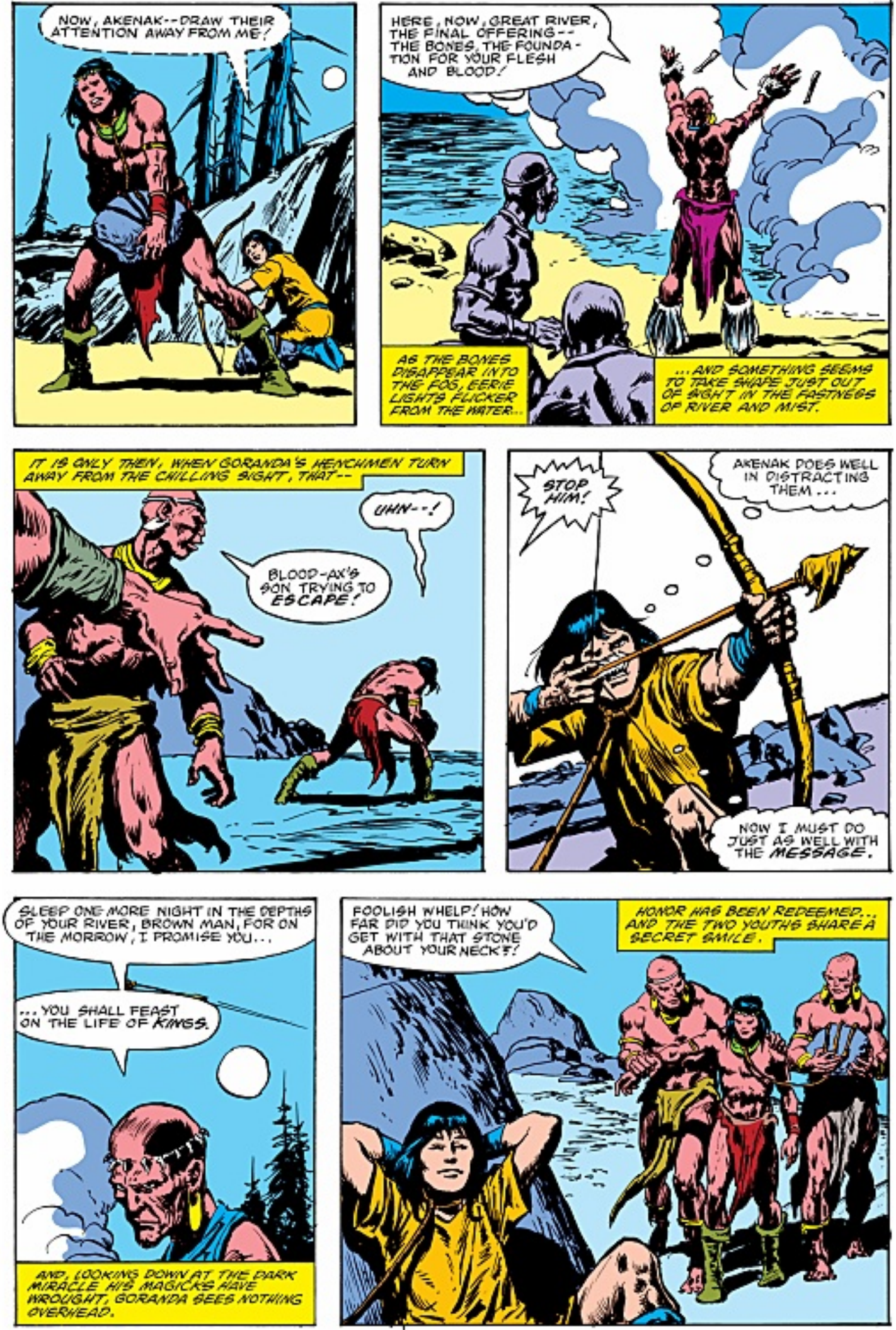
LATER, AFTER GORANDA HAS MADE CAMP AT A PROMONTORY ACROSS THE RIVER, ON THE BOSSONIAN SIDE...
WHAT IS THIS PLACE, AKENAK?
IT IS A SACRED SITE, AQUILONIAN, WHERE THE ANCIENT PICT SHAMANS PRACTICED THEIR DARK ARTS...

DOUBTLESS, GORANDA IS WORKING SOME DEVILTRY EVEN NOW--AND WE GAVE HIM THE CHARMS TO DO IT. MEN! WE'RE NO MORE THAN STUPID BABES!
WE COULDN'T KNOW, AKENAK.

PERHAPS NOT, BUT I STILL FEEL LIKE A CHILD. I WAS TERRIFIED IN THAT GROTTO. TRUE, I WON THE BONES, BUT WERE IT NOT FOR YOU, I SHOULD NOW BE DEAD--A DEAD CHILD WHO NEVER REACHED MANHOOD.
THE SHAME IS HEAVIER THAN THE WEIGHT OF THIS STONE AROUND MY NECK...

THE RIVER IS YOUR SPIRIT--
--ITS WATERS YOUR BLOOD, ITS BED OF MUD YOUR FLESH...AND YOUR LIFE ESSENCE IS THAT OF ALL THOSE WHO DIED IN YOUR DARK DEPTHS...

DO YOU THINK GORANDA CAN MAKE IT WORK?
SO HE CLAIMS. BUT EVEN IF THE BROWN MAN FAILS TO SLAY CONAN AND DEKANAWATHA, THEY WILL NOT KNOW WE HAVE TAKEN REFUGE IN THE VILLAGE BY THE WATERFALL.
YES--AND THEIR SONS WILL STILL BE OUR HOSTAGES.
THEY'RE TAKING US TO THE VILLAGE BY THE WATERFALL--WE MUST GET A MESSAGE TO OUR FATHERS.
BUT HOW?
A PORTION OF MY TUNIC WILL DO...
...ETCHED BY THE CHARRED END OF THIS STICK.
BUT HOW WILL WE GET YOUR MESSAGE TO THEM?
THE TRAIL YOUR RUNNERS USE, AKENAK...
IT'S ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, WELL BEYOND OUR REACH--BUT IS IT BEYOND A BOW'S REACH?
PERHAPS, FOR SAFETY, IT WAS MARKED TO BE JUST BEYOND BOW'S REACH.
NO MATTER. I MUST TRY.
NOW, GREAT RIVER, I HAVE GIVEN YOU WINGS OF EAGLE, HORNS OF STAG--AND IN RETURN, I CALL UPON YOUR BREATH OF LIFE!
AS IF IN MAGICAL RESPONSE, DENSE FOG BOILS FROM THE HEART OF THE RIVER, GRADUALLY BLANKETING FROM BANK TO BANK...
I ONLY HOPE YOUR RUNNERS HAVE SHARP EYES--SHARP ENOUGH TO SPOT AN ARROW A FEW FEET OFF THE TRAIL--
WHEN I REACH THE BOW, AKENAK, YOU WILL HAVE A CHANCE TO REDEEM YOUR HONOR...


NOW, AKENAK--DRAW THEIR ATTENTION AWAY FROM ME!
HERE, NOW, GREAT RIVER, THE FINAL OFFERING-- THE BONES, THE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR FLESH AND BLOOD!
AS THE BONES DISAPPEAR INTO THE FOG, EERIE LIGHTS FLICKER FROM THE WATER...
...AND SOMETHING SEEMS TO TAKE SHAPE JUST OUT OF SIGHT IN THE FASTNESS OF RIVER AND MIST.
IT IS ONLY THEN, WHEN GORANDA'S HENCHMEN TURN AWAY FROM THE CHILLING SIGHT, THAT--
UHN--!
BLOOD-AX'S SON TRYING TO ESCAPE!
STOP HIM!
AKENAK DOES WELL IN DISTRACTING THEM...
NOW I MUST DO JUST AS WELL WITH THE MESSAGE.
SLEEP ONE MORE NIGHT IN THE DEPTHS OF YOUR RIVER, BROWN MAN, FOR ON THE MORROW, I PROMISE YOU...
...YOU SHALL FEAST ON THE LIFE OF KINGS.
AND, LOOKING DOWN AT THE DARK MIRACLE HIS MAGICKS HAVE WROUGHT, GORANDA SEES NOTHING OVERHEAD.
FOOLISH WHELP! HOW FAR DID YOU THINK YOU'D GET WITH THAT STONE ABOUT YOUR NECK?!
HONOR HAS BEEN REDEEMED.., AND THE TWO YOUTHS SHARE A SECRET SMILE.

NEXT MORNING, A PICT RUNNER BURSTS INTO THE VILLAGE....
DEKANAWATHA--/ A MESSAGE... FOUND...JUST OFF... TRAIL...
IT IS IN YOUR WRITING, CONAN.
AYE--"WE ARE PRISONERS OF GORANDA-- BEING TAKEN TO VILLAGE AT WATERFALL. BEWARE THE BROWN MAN. CONN AND AKENAK." HMM... THE BROWN MAN... DOUBTLESS A REFERENCE TO A PICT...
BUT STILL, WHY WOULD CONN PHRASE IT IN SUCH CODE?
NO CODE, CONAN... BUT RATHER THE NAME OF THE MOST FEARSOME DEVIL EVER TO HAUNT BLACK RIVER. IT WAS SLAIN AGES GONE, BY ONE OF MY VERY ANCESTORS...
BUT NOW, IT SEEMS, GORANDA ZEK HAS FOUND A WAY TO REVIVIFY HIM.
GORANDA'S SHAMAN'S HUT IS EMPTY--AND HIS HENCHMEN ARE GONE!
I SMELL FIERCE TREACHERY, CONAN, AND I FEAR THAT OUR SONS ARE IN MORTAL DANGER!
WE DEPART IN MOMENTS, CONAN, WITH A PARTY OF MY FIVE BEST WARRIORS.
HONE YOUR BLADE FOR WAR.
I LIKE IT NOT, CONAN, AND I AM CHILLED WITH THE SAME DREAD FELT WHEN WE CROSSED THAT HELLISH RIVER. IT COULD BE A TRAP...
AYE, TROCERO, AND I COULD BE A KING WHO FEARS TRAPS AND INTRIGUES ALL AROUND HIM, 'TIL HE IS AFRAID TO LEAVE THE FALSE SAFETY OF HIS THRONE.
BUT I AM NOT SUCH A KING. YOU WILL REMAIN BEHIND AS REGENT IN MY ABSENCE...

"BESIDES, TROCERO, WHAT HARM CAN COME TO ME? THEY ARE ONLY SIX PICTS."
BUT AS CONAN RIDES BESIDE DEKANAWATHA, HE KNOWS HIS PARTING COMMENT WAS MERE BRAVADO.
THE PICTS ARE FIERCE WARRIORS, AND THEIR ULULATING CREE OF WAR HAVE CHILLED MEN'S SOULS SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL.
INDEED, THE PICT CHIEFTAIN ALONE WOULD BE FOE ENOUGH TO CAUSE HIM WORRY... IF NOT DEFEAT.
NO, NOT DEFEAT... NOT QUITE.
STILL, BETTER TO RIDE WITH DEKANAWATHA THAN AGAINST HIM.
LATER...
YOUR SON, CONN'S, KNIFE-SHEATH, CONAN--AND A SHRED OF AKENAK'S LOINCLOTH...
TOO EASY, BLOOD-AX, FINDING BOTH CLUES AT ONCE--AND RIGHT HERE ON THE TRAIL.
YES, I SMELL THE TRAP, TOO. AND YET... DO WE WISH TO TURN BACK?
CONAN'S PIERCING BLUE EYES SMOLDER AND THE TONE OF HIS VOICE WOULD RAISE THE HACKLES OF A LESSER MAN THAN DEKANAWATHA, THOUGH HE SPEAKS BUT FOUR SIMPLE WORDS...
THEY ARE OUR SONS.
THEY RIDE ON IN SILENCE. DEKANAWATHA SPEAKS ONLY WHEN THEY NEAR THE GROTTO-SHRINE.
THE BONES GORANDA SENT THEM TO FETCH, CONAN--YOU REALIZE THEY DID NOT BELONG TO MY ANCESTOR...?
THE BONES OF THE BROWN MAN, THEN?
YES, THAT WOULD FIT.
AYE, I WAS AFRAID OF THAT.

AND THIS IS THE GROTTO-SHRINE?
YES, CONAN, IT WAS PROBABLY HERE THAT GORANDA ZEK TOOK THEM CAPTIVE AND--
AGH-H!
THEY COME FROM NOWHERE AND EVERYWHERE, SOME THIRTY OF THEM, HOWLING AND SHRIEKING AS THEY SPRING FROM ROCK AND BRUSH...
THEY ALL HAVE BEEN PROMISED MUCH BY THE SHAMAN, GORANDA ZEK.
DEATH TO DEKANAWATHA BLOOD-AX AND THE AQUILONIAN KING!

YOUR SUBJECTS, BLOOD-AX--IT SEEMS THEY ARE NOT ALL LOYAL!
THEY SOON WILL BE, CONAN--LOYAL OR DEAD!

AND THE BLACK RIVER SPLASHES RED AS CONAN AND DEKANAWATHA CARVE A PATH THROUGH THE PICT ATTACKERS, BROADSWORD AND WAR-AX HUMMING IN DREADFUL HARMONY...
NEVERTHELESS--
THERE ARE ONLY FOUR OF US LEFT! FLEE-- AND I'LL DEAL WITH THESE DOGS SOME OTHER DAY!

CROSS OVER TO THE AQUILONIAN SIDE, BLOOD-AX! WE CAN DOUBLE BACK AT THE FALLS!
NO, CONAN-- THERE MAY BE ANOTHER AMBUSH ON THE OTHER SIDE!
AS LONG AS THE RIVER STAYS SHALLOW, BEST TO KEEP IN THE MIDDLE!
BUT AS SOON AS THEY ROUND THE FIRST BEND...
THEY'VE HALTED THEIR PURSUIT, BLOOD-AX-- HANGING BACK OUT OF SIGHT...
EH--?

THE TRAP WE BOTH SMELLED--THE AMBUSH BY THOSE RENEGADE PICTS--WAS ONLY PART OF IT!
YOU THINK THEY MEANT ONLY TO HERD US, HERE, CONAN? BUT WHY--?
THEN, AS THE VAPOROUS MIASMA GATHERS UPON THE SURFACE OF THE DARK RIVER AND UNDULATES TOWARD THEM...
I KNOW NOT, DEKANAWATHA... BUT I SENSE THE STENCH OF VILE SORCERY IN THIS MIST...
...BUT BY CROM AND MITRA I'LL STAND READY TO FACE ANYTHING TO SAVE MY SON -- EVEN IF THE WHOLE RIVER SHOULD BE COVERED IN THIS CURSED MIST!
CONAN, LOOK! SOMETHING MOVES IN IT--SOMETHING HUGE!
CROM'S BLOOD!
IT IS HIM, CONAN-- THE DEVIL OF OUR LEGENDS...

"...THE BROWN MAN OF THE RIVER!"
THE THING RISES FROM DARK WATER AND SHROUDING FOG, A GIANT FIVE TIMES CONAN'S HEIGHT, HIS FLESH MUD-BROWN AND SLIMY, COVERED WITH SHAGGY MOSS-LIKE HAIR...
SNAKES WRITHE ATOP HIS GROTESQUE, SKULLISH HEAD AND A FALLEN TREE SERVES AS A CLUB...
BUT MOST SHOCKING OF ALL, IN A LIQUID BURBLE OF DISTORTED SOUND, HE SPEAKS...
AYE--I AM THE BROWN MAN OF THE RIVER, O KINGS, AND I HAVE BEEN RESURRECTED BY THE WITCH-MAN GORANDA ZEK...
...HE WHO HAS APPOINTED ME TO SLAY YOU!

BUT GRATITUDE TO GORANDA ZEK MEANS LITTLE TO ME NOW-- AND I WOULD SLAY YOU ANYWAY...
HEAD FOR THE BANK, BLOOD-AX!
BUT THE HORSES BOLT IN TERROR.

...FOR, TO SUSTAIN MYSELF, NOW THAT I HAVE RISEN FROM MY SLEEP IN THE SLIME...
...I MUST FEED ON THE LIFE WHICH HAS DIED IN THE RIVER...

PREPARE TO DIE, LITTLE KINGS!
PREPARE TO FEED THE BROWN MAN!!

TERRIFIED WHEN THEY WERE CHILDREN BY TALES OF THE BROWN MAN TOLD AROUND THE NIGHT-FIRES, THE TWO OTHER PICTS FORGET THEIR STANDING AS DEKANAWATHA'S HAND-CHOSEN ESCORT...
...AND THEY FLEE.
UNTIL --
AWAY, LITTLE MEN--AWAY TO YOUR DEATHS! FLOAT UPON THE FARTHER WATER UNTIL I NEED A LATER FEED...
RIGHT NOW I WOULD FEAST UPON THE FLESH OF KINGS!
AND MY BLADE WOULD DRINK THE BLOOD OF A DEVIL!
BUT NO BLOOD JETS FROM THE WOUND.
INSTEAD, ONLY A BRACKISH ICHOR OF RIVER WATER GUSHES...
...AND THE BROWN MAN'S MUDLIKE FLESH QUICKLY OOZES DOWN TO SEAL THE WOUND.
THE BROWN MAN CANNOT BE INJURED BY LOSS OF THE LIFE-FLUID, LITTLE KING...
...NOT WHILE I STAND IN THE WATERS WHICH EVER REPLENISH ME!
CROM!

THE RENEGADES' TRICK OF HERDING US INTO AN AMBUSH, BLOOD-AX--IT MAY BE OUR ONLY SANE TACTIC AS WELL...
LEAD THE BROWN MAN INTO AN AMBUSH, CONAN--?

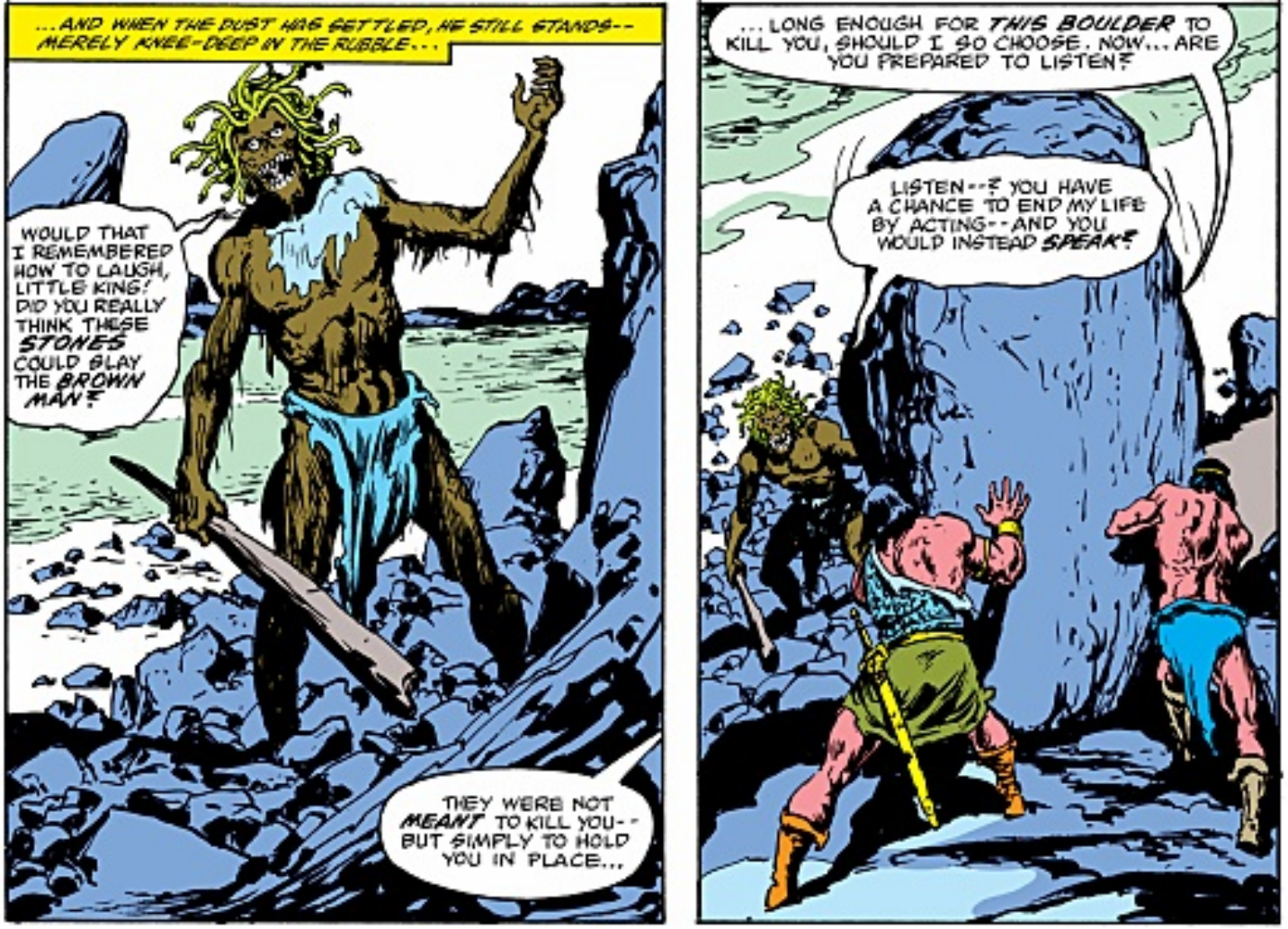
BUT WE HAVE NO ALLIES TO SPRING IT ON HIM!
I DIDN'T SAY IT WOULD BE EASY.

STILL, IT'S OUR ONLY CHANCE!
MAKE FOR THE HILL, PICT, OR SAY YOUR PRAYERS TO MOTHER DANU!
BUT I STILL DON'T--

HURRY, BLOOD-AX--HELP ME START AN AVALANCHE!

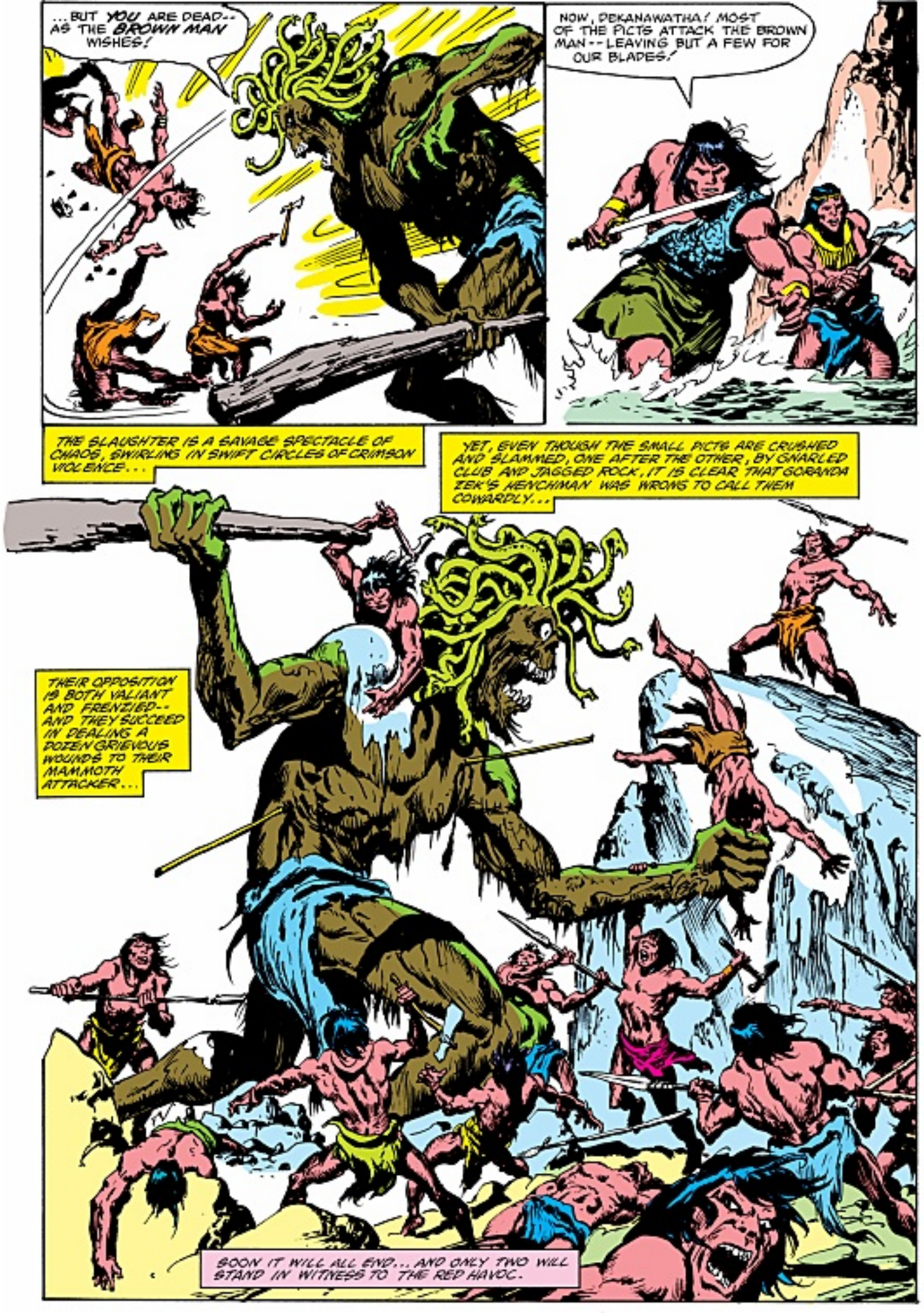
AVALANCHE? THEN THE ROCKS THEMSELVES--
;NGH; AYE, BLOOD-AX...

...THEY SHALL BE OUR ALLIES IN SPRINGING THE TRAP ON HIM!
BUT THOUGH THE ROCKSLIDE ROARS AND THUNDERS DOWN THE HILL, THE BROWN MAN IS LARGE...


...AND WHEN THE DUST HAS SETTLED, HE STILL STANDS--MERELY KNEE-DEEP IN THE RUBBLE...
WOULD THAT I REMEMBERED HOW TO LAUGH, LITTLE KING! DID YOU REALLY THINK THESE STONES COULD SLAY THE BROWN MAN?
THEY WERE NOT MEANT TO KILL YOU--BUT SIMPLY TO HOLD YOU IN PLACE...
...LONG ENOUGH FOR THIS BOULDER TO KILL YOU, SHOULD I SO CHOOSE. NOW... ARE YOU PREPARED TO LISTEN?
LISTEN--? YOU HAVE A CHANCE TO END MY LIFE BY ACTING--AND YOU WOULD INSTEAD SPEAK?

AYE--I'VE LEARNED A LESSON FROM MY SON. 'TIS TIME FOR DIPLOMACY AND COMPROMISE...
WE NEED A CLEAR PATH DOWNRIVER TO THE WATERFALL--OUR WAY IS BLOCKED BY SOME THIRTY OF GORANDA ZEK'S LOYAL PICTS.
YOU NEED LIFE TO SUSTAIN YOURSELF. CLEAR THE WAY FOR US THROUGH THE PICTS AND YOU MAY DO WITH THEM WHAT YOU WILL.
YOU ARE ASKING ME TO BETRAY GORANDA ZEK--HE WHO GRANTED ME NEW LIFE THROUGH HIS CONJURATIONS.
AYE--EITHER THAT OR LOSE YOUR NEW LIFE WHEN THIS BOULDER CRUSHES YOUR SKULL, AND REMEMBER THAT YOU NO LONGER STAND IN THE RIVER--THERE IS NO WAY TO "REPLENISH YOUR LIFE-FLUIDS."
VERY WELL, PALE LITTLE KING--YOU LEAVE ME NO CHOICE.

THEN, AS THE BROWN MAN EXTRICATES HIMSELF FROM THE RUBBLE OF THE ROCKSLIDE...
CAN HE BE TRUSTED, CONAN?
HE'S YOUR LEGEND--YOU TELL ME.
ONLY ONE THING IS CERTAIN, BLOOD-AX... WE CAN'T CUT OUR WAY THROUGH ALL THIRTY OF THOSE RENEGADE PICTS, AND--
--AND THEY HAVE OUR SONS.
YES, CONAN, I KNOW.
SOMEWHAT TO THEIR SURPRISE, THE BROWN MAN KEEPS HIS WORD, LEADING THE WAY DOWNRIVER...
THE PICTS LURK AROUND THE NEXT BEND, BROWN MAN ...
THEN WAIT HERE, LITTLE KINGS, UNTIL YOU HEAR THE SOUND OF THE BROWN MAN'S FURY...
THE BROWN MAN--/ BUT WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
ARE PEKANAWATHA AND CONAN DEAD AS OUR MASTER WISHES--?
NO, LITTLE ONES...


...BUT YOU ARE DEAD-- AS THE BROWN MAN WISHES!
NOW, DEKANAWATHA! MOST OF THE PICTS ATTACK THE BROWN MAN--LEAVING BUT A FEW FOR OUR BLADES!
THE SLAUGHTER IS A SAVAGE SPECTACLE OF CHAOS, SWIRLING IN SWIFT CIRCLES OF CRIMSON VIOLENCE...
YET, EVEN THOUGH THE SMALL PICTS ARE CRUSHED AND SLAMMED, ONE AFTER THE OTHER, BY GNARLED CLUB AND JAGGED ROCK, IT IS CLEAR THAT GORANDA IEK'S HENCHMAN WAS WRONG TO CALL THEM COWARDLY...
THEIR OPPOSITION IS BOTH VALIANT AND FRENZIED-- AND THEY SUCCEED IN DEALING A DOZEN GRIEVOUS WOUNDS TO THEIR MAMMOTH ATTACKER...
SOON IT WILL ALL END... AND ONLY TWO WILL STAND IN WITNESS TO THE RED HAVOC.

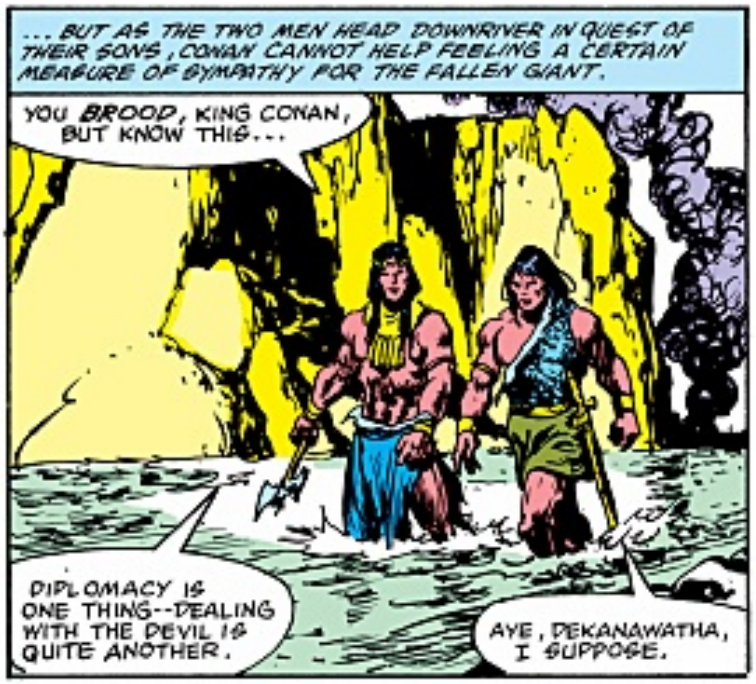
THESE ARE THE LAST OF THEM, CONAN!
AYE, BLOOD-AX, AND THE BROWN MAN HAS FELLED THE OTHERS--
--THOUGH NOT BEFORE THEY DROVE HIM FAR FROM HIS PRECIOUS RIVER!

TOO LATE... EVEN IF I COULD REACH THE WATERS... IT IS TOO LATE FOR THE BROWN MAN...
BUT THEY... ARE ALL DEAD, LITTLE KING...

AYE, BROWN MAN, GONE TO THEIR REWARDS IN HADES.

WHERE I SHALL GREET THEM, LITTLE KING... AND REPAY THEM FOR THIS TREACHERY YOU AND THEY HAVE CONSPIRED UPON ME!

THE LIFE HAS LEFT YOUR LEGEND, DEKANAWATHA, BLOOD-AX.
...AND THEN... TOGETHER, LITTLE KING... WE SHALL ALL PREPARE A PROPER GREETING FOR...
...YOUUU...
COME--OUR SONS AWAIT US.
NO TEARS, THEN, SPILL FOR THE BROWN MAN...

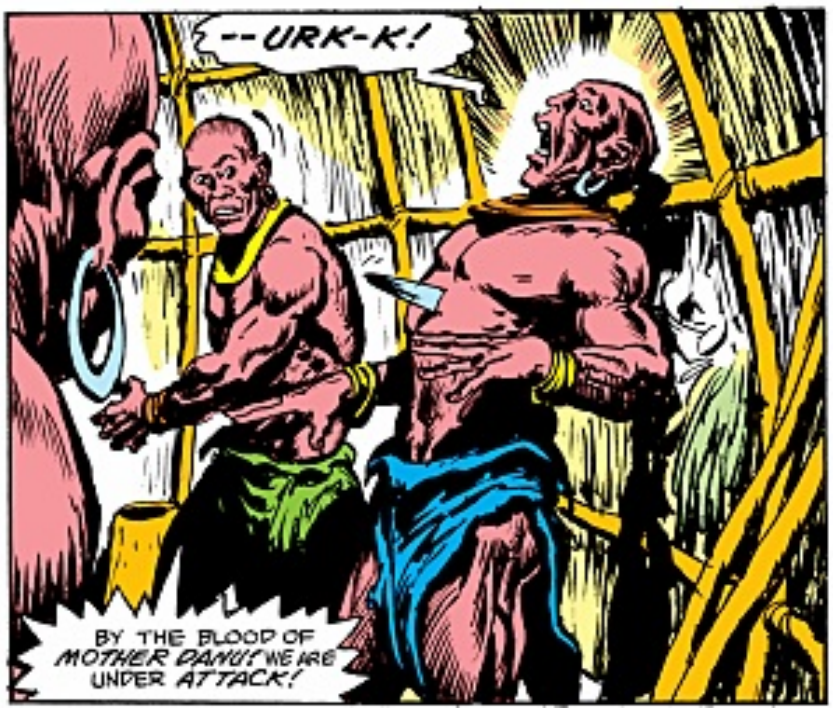

... BUT AS THE TWO MEN HEAD DOWNRIVER IN QUEST OF THEIR SONS, CONAN CANNOT HELP FEELING A CERTAIN MEASURE OF SYMPATHY FOR THE FALLEN GIANT.
YOU BROOD, KING CONAN, BUT KNOW THIS...
DIPLOMACY IS ONE THING--DEALING WITH THE DEVIL IS QUITE ANOTHER.
AYE, DEKANAWATHA, I SUPPOSE.

FINALLY, BY NIGHTFALL...
THE VILLAGE!
PAINTED SILVER BY THE MOON, THE RIVER RUSHES FOR THE FALLS.
QUIETLY, CONAN, LET US SEARCH THE HUTS.

HERE.
WE SHALL WAIT HERE BY THE WATER-FALL.

--UNTIL THE AMBUSH PARTY RETURNS WITH WORD OF DEKANAWATHA'S AND CONAN'S DEATHS, WHEREUPON EVERY LOYAL PICT SHALL RALLY TO OUR CAUSE.
YES, GORANDA, AND I HOPE THE AMBUSH PARTY BRINGS THE KINGS' HEADS...

I'D LIKE TO HANG THE SKULL OF THAT CIMMERIAN BARBARIAN FROM MY--

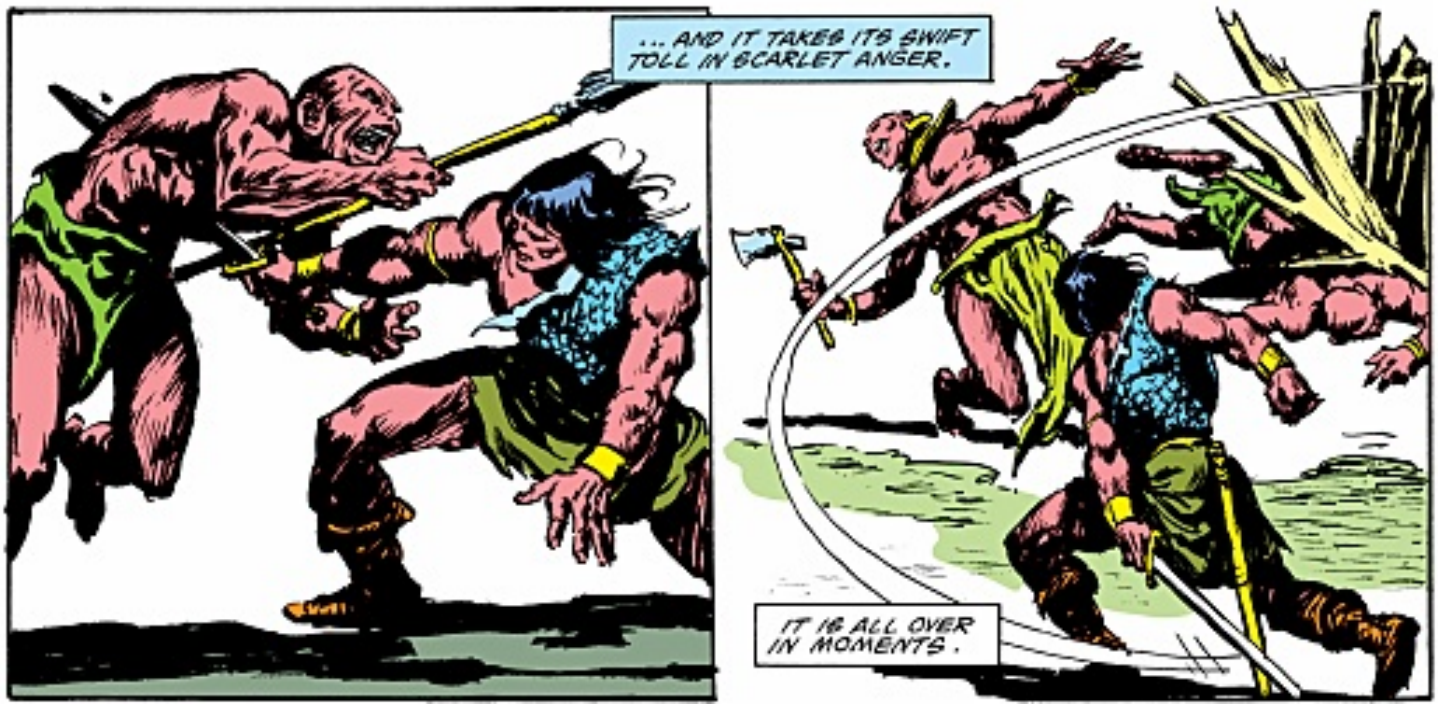

--URK-K!
BY THE BLOOD OF MOTHER DANU! WE ARE UNDER ATTACK!

INDEED THEY ARE UNDER ATTACK--BY TWO OF THE MOST COLDLY WRATHFUL MEN EVER TO STRIDE THE EARTH...

DEKANAWATHA!
EPONA'S BLOOD! THEY LIVE!!
CONAN!

YOU MAY HAVE THE OTHER TWO, CONAN--BUT THE DEVIL-SHAMAN IS MINE!

THE KING OF AQUILONIA NEEDS NO FURTHER URGING.
HIS BROADSWORD THRUMS A DEADLY SONG...


...AND IT TAKES ITS SWIFT TOLL IN SCARLET ANGER.
IT IS ALL OVER IN MOMENTS.

NAUGHT TO DO, NOW, BUT WATCH--AS BLOOD-AX SINGS HIS OWN SONG OF BLOOD...
WHY DO YOU BACK AWAY, GORANDA ZEK?
YOU WANTED TO USURP MY CHIEFTAINSHIP--
STAND AND TAKE IT NOW--MAN TO MAN!
OR DO YOU WANT THE CHIEFTAINSHIP BROUGHT TO YOU--
--LIKE THIS!
WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A SHRIEK, GORANDA ZEK'S BODY PITCHES INTO THE FALLS.
SO WILL IT WALLOW IN THE LOWER RIVER, THERE TO FEED THE FISHES AND SNAKES AND OTHER DARK THINGS.
LATER...
OUT OF CURIOSITY, LADS... WHO COMPLETED THE RITES SUCCESSFULLY?
HE DID!
IT SEEMS, CONAN, THAT OUR SONS HAVE GROWN UP.
AYE, DEKANAWATHA BLOOD-AX, THAT THEY HAVE. BUT WHAT, NOW, OF THE BROWN MAN?
IN SPRING, THE RIVER WILL RISE AND FLOOD ITS BANKS TO CLAIM HIM, CONAN. THEN WITH HIS FINAL PASSING, SHALL LIFE RETURN TO HIS LEGEND. AND IF LIFE SHOULD EVER RETURN TO MORE THAN HIS LEGEND--
--LET US HOPE HE FEEDS ON THE SHAMAN.
AND, LAUGHING, FOUR MEN BEGIN THE LONG TREK UPRIVER.
NEXT: THE FANG OF SET!

KING CONAN

c/o MARVEL COMICS GROUP
575 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022

LOUISE JONES
EDITOR
DANNY FINGEROTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Marvel,

DeCamp and Carter's *Conan The Avenger* possesses its own exciting energy, and makes subtle, inventive use of the Robert E. Howard-established Hyborian mythos. This was especially evident in the adapted segment featured in KING CONAN #7. Like so many other faithful followers, I've waited almost a decade for your visual version of Conan and Yezdigerd's conclusive clash. It was definitely worth the wait, as was seeing our grim hero reunited with the Red Brotherhood and the beautiful Yasmina.

Kevin C. McConnell
118 Main Ave.
Warren, PA 16365

Dear Louise, etc.,

KING CONAN #7 was definitely to my tastes. It's amazing how fluidly your scripts recapture the flavor of the original novel. And I could go on forever, praising John Buscema and Ernie Chan's contributions to the visual medium, but somehow that's not enough.Conan's imprisonment and sudden breakout in the first few pages were illustrated in the remarkable manner that only that team can manage. By the time Conan jumped out of the tower and into the sea, I had completely forgotten that this was Count Trocero's interpretation of the story, as told to Prince Conn. In any case, you can see how engrossed I quickly became with the storyline. After Rolf disappeared, it became harder to follow, though, having a totally different theme than earlier in the story. But maybe this meshing was why I'm so looking forward to the conclusion.

I've read most of the Conan novels, even the latest, *Conan The Mercenary*, but I missed *Conan The Avenger* and *Conan The Usurper*. Perhaps you could adapt the second one?

Napoleon Zivkovic
224 E. 26th St.
Paterson, NJ 07514

In a way we already have, Napoleon — for CONAN THE USURPER wasn't a novel but a collection of short stories, most (if not all) of which have been adapted over the years in our brother mag, SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN.

By the way, if you're interested in Big John Buscema's work, keep your eyes open for a forthcoming issue of EPIC, which will feature a WEIRDWORLD story meticulously illustrated by John and written by the strip's creator, Doug Moench (who, as you may have noticed, has taken over the scripting reins on KING CONAN as well). We guarantee you: it'll be a treat.

Dear Louise,

"A Clash Of Kings" was great, as was John Buscema's work. (Is there any chance he'll ever ink his own pencils again?) He and Ernie work well together, visually capturing the strength of Robert E. Howard's most popular hero. Also, the villainess, Thanara, is one of the few females in this book who is a power in her own right. I hope she'll play a greater role in the conclusion of *Conan The Avenger*. The return of Rolf of Aesgaard showd a nice flair for continuity in the series, and it's good to see Yas back, since she too can hold her own with Conan around.

Suggestions for future KING CONAN stories(you have so many areas to cover): Conan's son, Prince Conn, is one of the rare sons of a hero who isn't crazy or being kidnapped all the time, so do something more with him. And how about showing the fates of some of Conan's friends and allies over the years?

Charles David Haskell
15 W. 139th St.
New York, NY 10037

Doug's got some jaw-dropping surprises in store for Conan's chums, Charles — just wait and see! As for Big John inking himnself, check out SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN #73, where you'll get your wish — in spades!

Dear Marvel,

KING CONAN #7 was great. If every comic was as good as this one, you'd be sold out every week. Conan is the strongest, gutsiest hero around, using brains and brawn to stop his opponents. If you keep writing great comics like this one, I'll buy it every week. 'Nuff said.

Beau Beaujon
1270 Franklin St.
Johnstown, PA

'Nuff said, for you maybe, Beau. But Doug, John, and Danny almnost went out and bought a one-way ticket for the hills. Y'see, they all thought you knew something they didn't when you referred to KING CONAN coming out every week, and our already overworked creative team just sort of freaked out. You gotta *watch* it when you're talking to these high-strung creative types. (Seriously, thanks for the kind words, and we really wish it were possible to put out KING CONAN on a weekly basis. Keep reading, Beau. Your support means everything in the world to us.)

Dear Marvel,

KING CONAN #7 was out of sight. I love seeing the older Conan meet up with long-lost friends. Have Tara and Yusef reappear soon and have them both be very warlike. And I do wish you'd have Conan meet a few Marvel super-characters that would fit in perfectly with a few of his stories, like Venus, Thor, The Black Knight, Valkyrie or Hercules.

Wilson Rivera
805 Grand St.
Brooklyn, NY 11211

We don't think Conan will ever be meeting other Marvel characters, Wilson — but ya never know! Thor fans can find their hero in his own monthly book, as well as in THE AVENGERS, and Black Knight fans can look for that hero to reappear in the future in Marvel's forthcoming MARVEL FANFARE. What's that? It's editor Al Milgrom's new project, a 32 page slick paper, *no-ad* comic with deluxe color, soon to be released to comics shops, and featuring brand new stories of Marvel characters as done by Marvel's top creative talents. Watch for it.

(LETTERS CONTINUE ON NEXT PAGE...)

Dear Louise and Co.,

I've been buying CONAN and KING CONAN for two years now, and for some reason, I thought I didn't like them. Lately though, it has dawned on me that these are two of my *favorite* titles. I realized this after reading KING CONAN #7. The writing, penciling, inking, coloring and lettering all added up to a tremendous experience. (This is the first time I've noticed the lettering on *any* comic.) The story flowed nicely, yet moved quickly. I liked seeing the pirates and learning that the legend of Conan still lives among them. How about bringing them back in future issues? Keep up the good work (and the pin-ups.)

Alex Kasman
73-47 189th St.
Flushing, NY 11366

We know you like the *titles*, Alex. Now tell us what you think of the *books!* (Just kidding.) And we'll see what we can do about bringing back your piratical penpals.

Dear Louise,

First, I'd like to compliment you and your staff on your excellent publication. Each issue has been faithfully and skillfully adapted from the Conan novels. Recently, however, it did come to my attention that there is a mistake in KING CONAN #7. To wit: the Vilayet Sea is an inland body of water without any outlets to the ocean. It is therefore erroneous to have Conan refer to his men as Barachans, the Barachan Isles being located in the Western Ocean, about a thousand miles from the Vilayet Sea. At the end of the page on which Thanara is carried off, Conan gives an order to his men to sail the ship back to the Barachan Isles. This is an obvious error, because they would have to *sail* over mountains and deserts to reach the ocean, an impossibility even for Conan!

Tim Fraley
1731 SE 9th St.
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33316

What?! Mistake? Us?!

When Conan refers to his men as Barachans, he's just confusing them in the heat of battle with Barachans, whom he also ran with in younger days and still holds fond thoughts of. Or he meant the term as a compliment. As far as mountains and desserts and sailing, haven't you ever heard of "ships of the dessert"? No? How about the Stygian Canal? No? (Okay, Tim, you caught us. And a certified gold-plated *No Prize* to any Howardite who can get us out of this mess!)

Dear Louise,

The latest issue of KING CONAN, number 7, was possibly the best issue so far, with exciting cover, terrific story, gorgeous art — and I loved your "Hyborian Pin-Up Gallery." Absolutely fantastic.

But...wait...what is this I see on one of the pin-up pages? Could it be...no...maybe...it *is!* There's the name Smith penned right there on one of the pages. Could it be that Barry Smith is back? No, it doesn't say Barry...it says Paul. Paul Smith. I don't believe my eyes — another Smith. Crom and Mitra, this man is superb. His art is utterly fantastic. I hope and pray you give this man a chance to draw a Conan story. He's a natural.

Scott Mitchell
Rt. 1, Box 230
Fortville, IN 46040

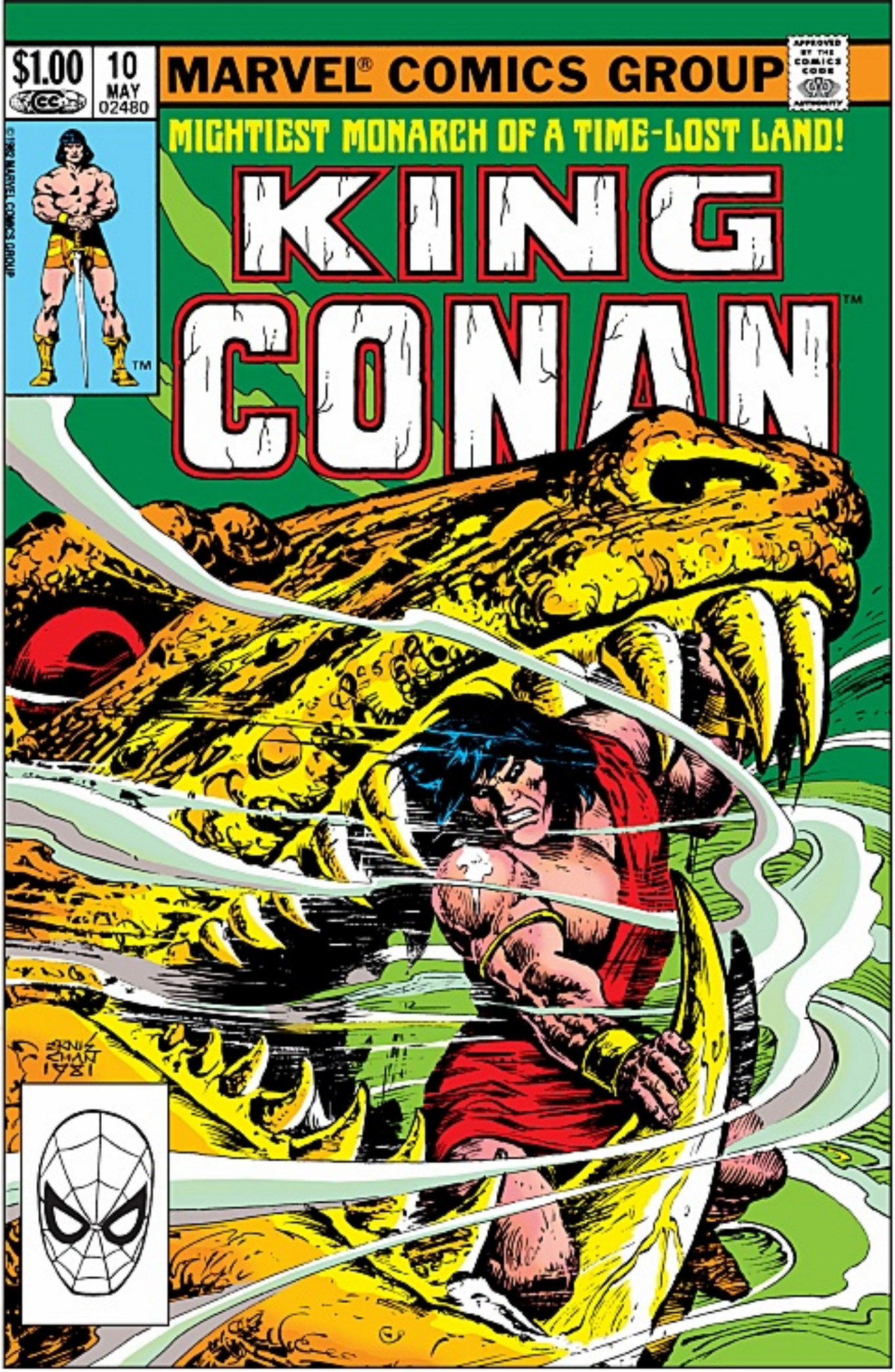
We think Paul is something special, too, Scott. And while we're not sure at the moment if he's going to do a Conan story or not, but we'll pass your encouragement on to him — and thanks.

Dear Conan Staff,

Thanks for your CONAN comics. The art is always terrific, the stories fantastic, except that you really should try to stay away from adaptations. KING CONAN #7, "A Clash Of Kings!", was superb, as usual. I'm glad King Yezdigerd finally got his just desserts. There is just one thing that bothers me: R.E. Howard always described Conan as a giant, towering a head over all other men, yet you continue to draw him the common height. I know it's too late to change it now, but I just wanted to get it off my chest.

David Grilla
35 Tampa St.
Worchester, MA 01604

Consider it off, David, and breathe a sigh of relief. But if it's non-adapted KING CONAN adventure you want, then stick around. 'Cause beginning this issue, our now *bi-monthly* mag will be featuring all-original storylines from Doug's fertile imagination. (Which is not to say adaptations are out for good. Lots of folks like them, too.)



COVER PENCILER & INKER: ERNIE CHAN

Stan Lee PRESENTS: KING CONAN

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD

THE FANG OF SET

DOUG MOENCH WRITER • ERNIE CHAN ARTIST • JANICE CHIANG LETTERER • GEORGE ROUSSOS COLORIST • LOUISE JONES EDITOR • JIM SHOOTER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

* SEE ISSUE #2 -- Louise.

AND, TOO, EVEN THOUGH THE LAD HAS GROWN QUICKLY, HE IS STILL AFTER ALL A BOY--FAR FROM HIS PEAK OF STATURE AND STRENGTH.
AYE, BOLSAT, WE MUSTN'T OVERLOOK THAT FACT--DESPITE HIS SUCCESSFUL TEST OF MANHOOD.*
BUT...
*LAST ISSUE--L.

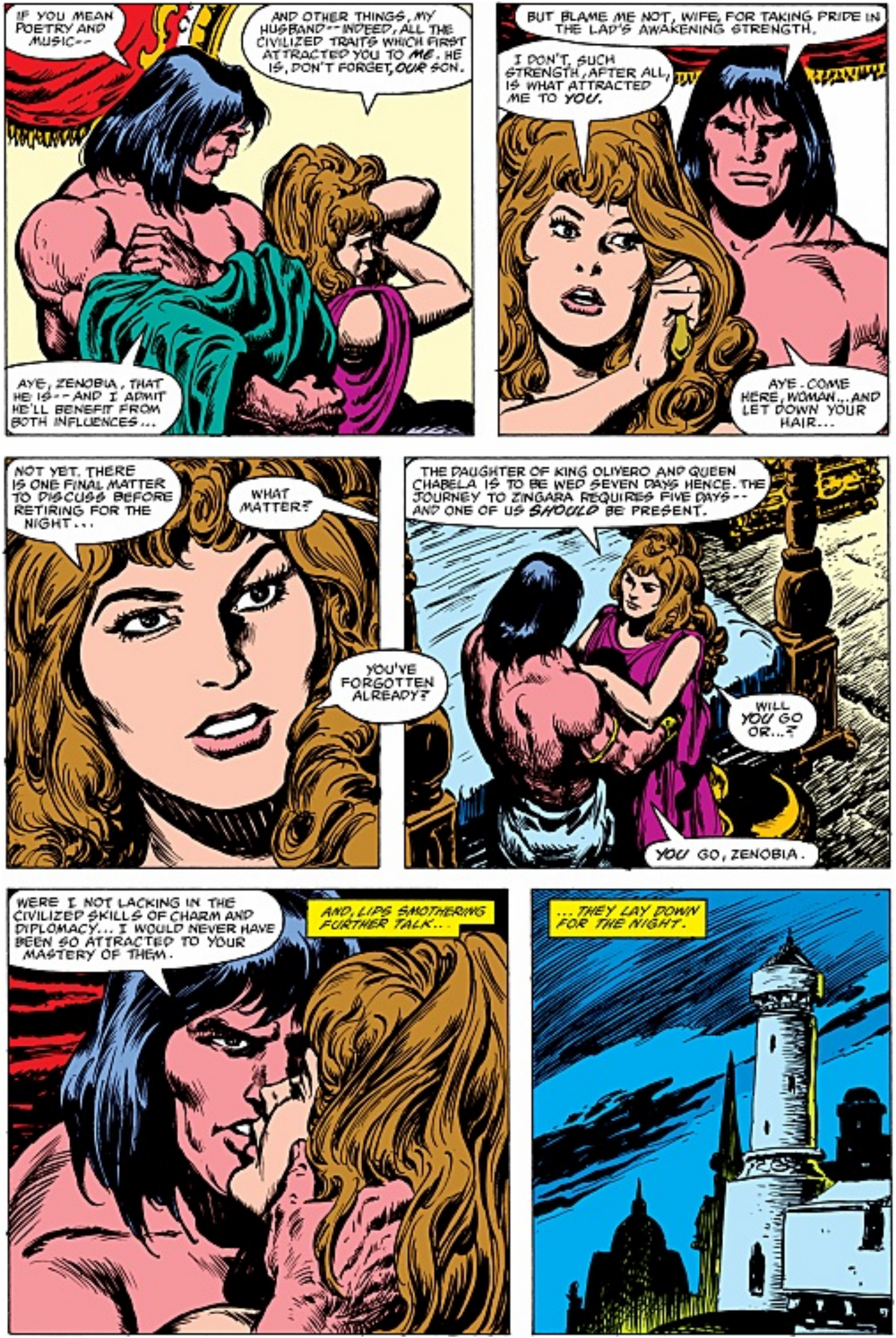
NEVERTHELESS, O KING, A MONTH OR TWO OF HARD TRAINING WITH THE TROOPS WOULD NOT BE OUT OF ORDER...
YOU... YOU MEAN IT?
AYE, READY OR NOT, IT CAN'T HURT. OFF TO FORT THANDARA WITH HIM, THEN...

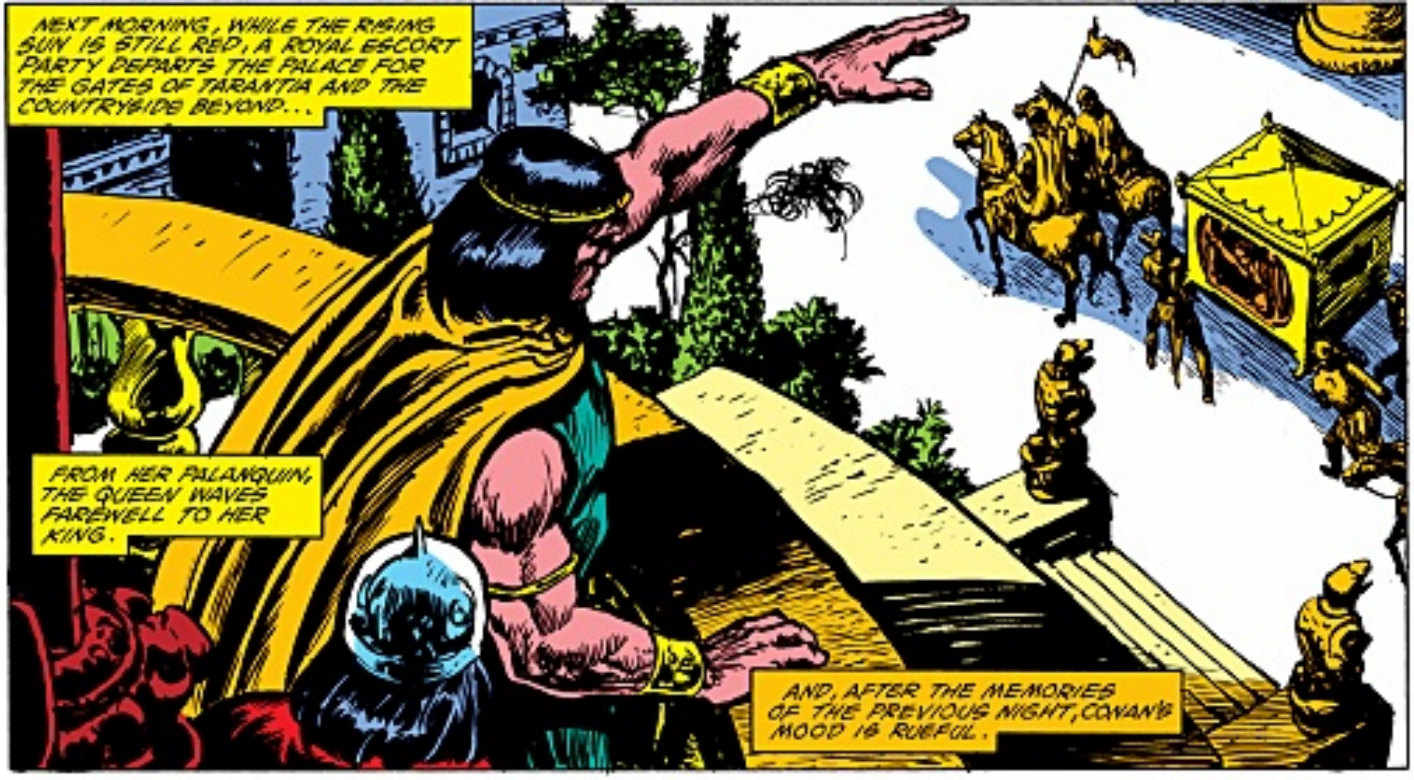
...AND SEE THAT HE EXPERIENCES THE BARRACKS LIFE OF THE IRON LEGIONS WITH NO SPECIAL CODDLING...
THANK YOU, FATHER! I--
SAVE YOUR GRATITUDE, CONN--I'VE ONLY GIVEN YOU A CHANCE TO PROVE YOURSELF A FIT WARRIOR. THE REST IS UP TO YOU, AND NO MEAN TASK.

YET, WATCHING HIS SON DEPART, CONAN ENJOYS A THIRD SMILE THIS DAY, HARBORING NO DOUBT THAT CONN WILL SUCCEED.
AFTER ALL, THE BOY IS THE SON OF A THIEF, A MERCENARY, AN ADVENTURER, PIRATE AND KING.

LATE THAT NIGHT, THE FLICKERING LIGHT OF TAPERS SPILLS FROM THE BEDCHAMBER OF CONAN AND HIS QUEEN...
YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN THE LAD, ZENOBIA!
HE WAS LIKE A LION-DEVIL, LUNGING AND SLASHING AND NEVER PAUSING FOR AN INSTANT!

POOR BOLSAT HAD TO CALL A HALT TO IT. OF COURSE, WE MADE SURE CONN DIDN'T REALIZE HOW GOOD HE--
YES, CONAN, BUT I HOPE THIS TRAINING WILL NOT INTERFERE WITH HIS CULTIVATION OF OTHER INTERESTS...


IF YOU MEAN POETRY AND MUSIC--
AND OTHER THINGS, MY HUSBAND--INDEED, ALL THE CIVILIZED TRAITS WHICH FIRST ATTRACTED YOU TO ME. HE IS, DON'T FORGET, OUR SON.
AYE, ZENOBIA, THAT HE IS--AND I ADMIT HE'LL BENEFIT FROM BOTH INFLUENCES...
BUT BLAME ME NOT, WIFE, FOR TAKING PRIDE IN THE LAD'S AWAKENING STRENGTH.
I DON'T. SUCH STRENGTH, AFTER ALL, IS WHAT ATTRACTED ME TO YOU.
AYE - COME HERE, WOMAN... AND LET DOWN YOUR HAIR...
NOT YET. THERE IS ONE FINAL MATTER TO DISCUSS BEFORE RETIRING FOR THE NIGHT...
WHAT MATTER?
YOU'VE FORGOTTEN ALREADY?
THE DAUGHTER OF KING OLIVERO AND QUEEN CHABELA IS TO BE WED SEVEN DAYS HENCE. THE JOURNEY TO ZINGARA REQUIRES FIVE DAYS--AND ONE OF US SHOULD BE PRESENT.
WILL YOU GO OR...?
YOU GO, ZENOBIA.
WERE I NOT LACKING IN THE CIVILIZED SKILLS OF CHARM AND DIPLOMACY... I WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN SO ATTRACTED TO YOUR MASTERY OF THEM.
AND, LIPS SMOTHERING FURTHER TALK...
...THEY LAY DOWN FOR THE NIGHT.

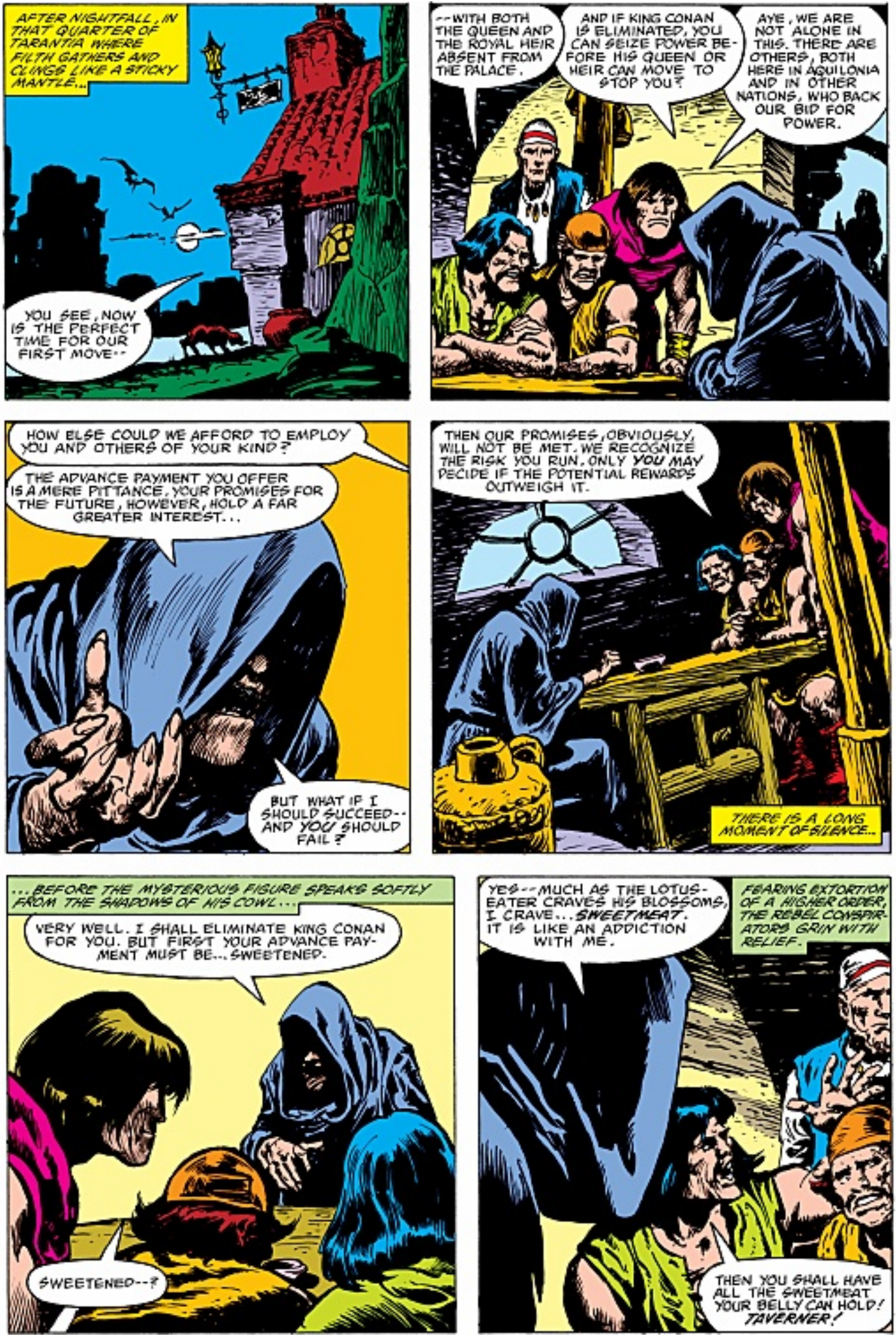

NEXT MORNING, WHILE THE RISING SUN IS STILL RED, A ROYAL ESCORT PARTY DEPARTS THE PALACE FOR THE GATES OF TARANTIA AND THE COUNTRYSIDE BEYOND...
FROM HER PALANQUIN, THE QUEEN WAVES FAREWELL TO HER KING.
AND, AFTER THE MEMORIES OF THE PREVIOUS NIGHT, CONAN'S MOOD IS RUEFUL.

COUNT TROCERO SENSES IT...
YOU WILL BE ALONE NOW, MY KING, WITH CONN OFF TO FORT THANDARA AND ZENOBIA VENTURING TO KORPAVA IN ZINGARA.
IT'S NOT THAT WHICH DEADENS ME, TROCERO...
I'VE SPENT MUCH OF MY LIFE ALONE, AND ENJOYED IT HUGELY.

WHAT THEN, MY KING?
I... I DON'T KNOW. MAYHAP THE COMBINATION OF BEING ALONE AND... AND THIS PALACE...
...THE STATE OF PEACE WE'RE IN...
THE STATE OF PEACE--?

AYE. PEACE IS FINE IF A MAN HAS SOMETHING ELSE TO DO, BUT PEACE AND BEING ALONE--IDLENESS AND SOLITUDE--INSPIRE NAUGHT BUT SLEEP.

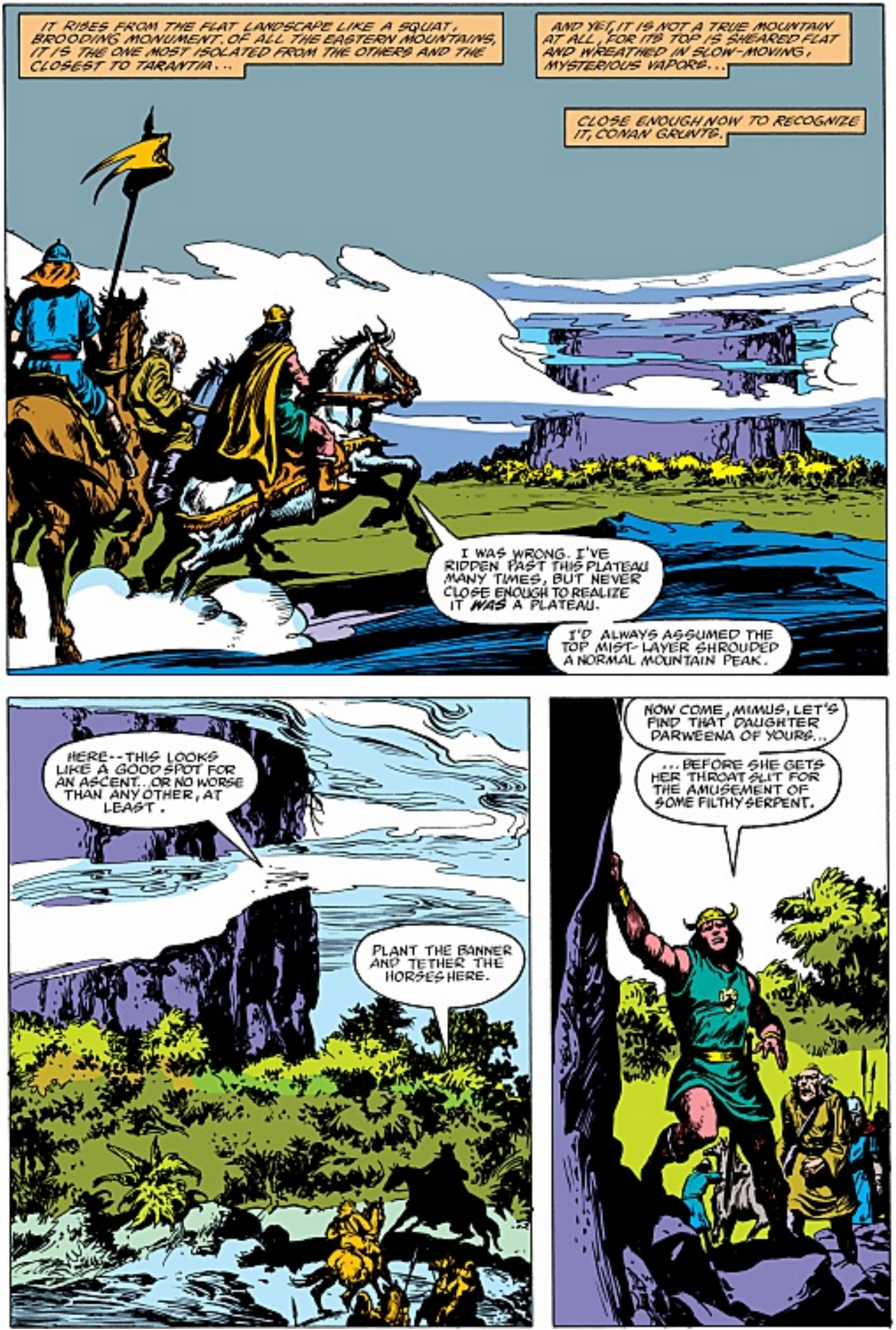
GOOD NIGHT, TROCERO.
BUT... IT'S MORNING.
CONAN MERELY GRUNTS.


AFTER NIGHTFALL, IN THAT QUARTER OF TARANTIA WHERE FILTH GATHERS AND CLINGS LIKE A STICKY MANTLE...
YOU SEE, NOW IS THE PERFECT TIME FOR OUR FIRST MOVE--
--WITH BOTH THE QUEEN AND THE ROYAL HEIR ABSENT FROM THE PALACE.
AND IF KING CONAN IS ELIMINATED, YOU CAN SEIZE POWER BEFORE HIS QUEEN OR HEIR CAN MOVE TO STOP YOU?
AYE, WE ARE NOT ALONE IN THIS. THERE ARE OTHERS, BOTH HERE IN AQUILONIA AND IN OTHER NATIONS, WHO BACK OUR BID FOR POWER.
HOW ELSE COULD WE AFFORD TO EMPLOY YOU AND OTHERS OF YOUR KIND?
THE ADVANCE PAYMENT YOU OFFER IS A MERE PITTANCE. YOUR PROMISES FOR THE FUTURE, HOWEVER, HOLD A FAR GREATER INTEREST...
BUT WHAT IF I SHOULD SUCCEED-- AND YOU SHOULD FAIL?
THEN OUR PROMISES, OBVIOUSLY, WILL NOT BE MET. WE RECOGNIZE THE RISK YOU RUN. ONLY YOU MAY DECIDE IF THE POTENTIAL REWARDS OUTWEIGH IT.
THERE IS A LONG MOMENT OF SILENCE...
...BEFORE THE MYSTERIOUS FIGURE SPEAKS SOFTLY FROM THE SHADOWS OF HIS COWL...
VERY WELL. I SHALL ELIMINATE KING CONAN FOR YOU. BUT FIRST YOUR ADVANCE PAYMENT MUST BE... SWEETENED.
SWEETENED--?
YES--MUCH AS THE LOTUS-EATER CRAVES HIS BLOSSOMS, I CRAVE... SWEETMEAT. IT IS LIKE AN ADDICTION WITH ME.
FEARING EXTORTION OF A HIGHER ORDER, THE REBEL CONSPIRATORS GRIN WITH RELIEF.
THEN YOU SHALL HAVE ALL THE SWEETMEAT YOUR BELLY CAN HOLD! TAVERNER!

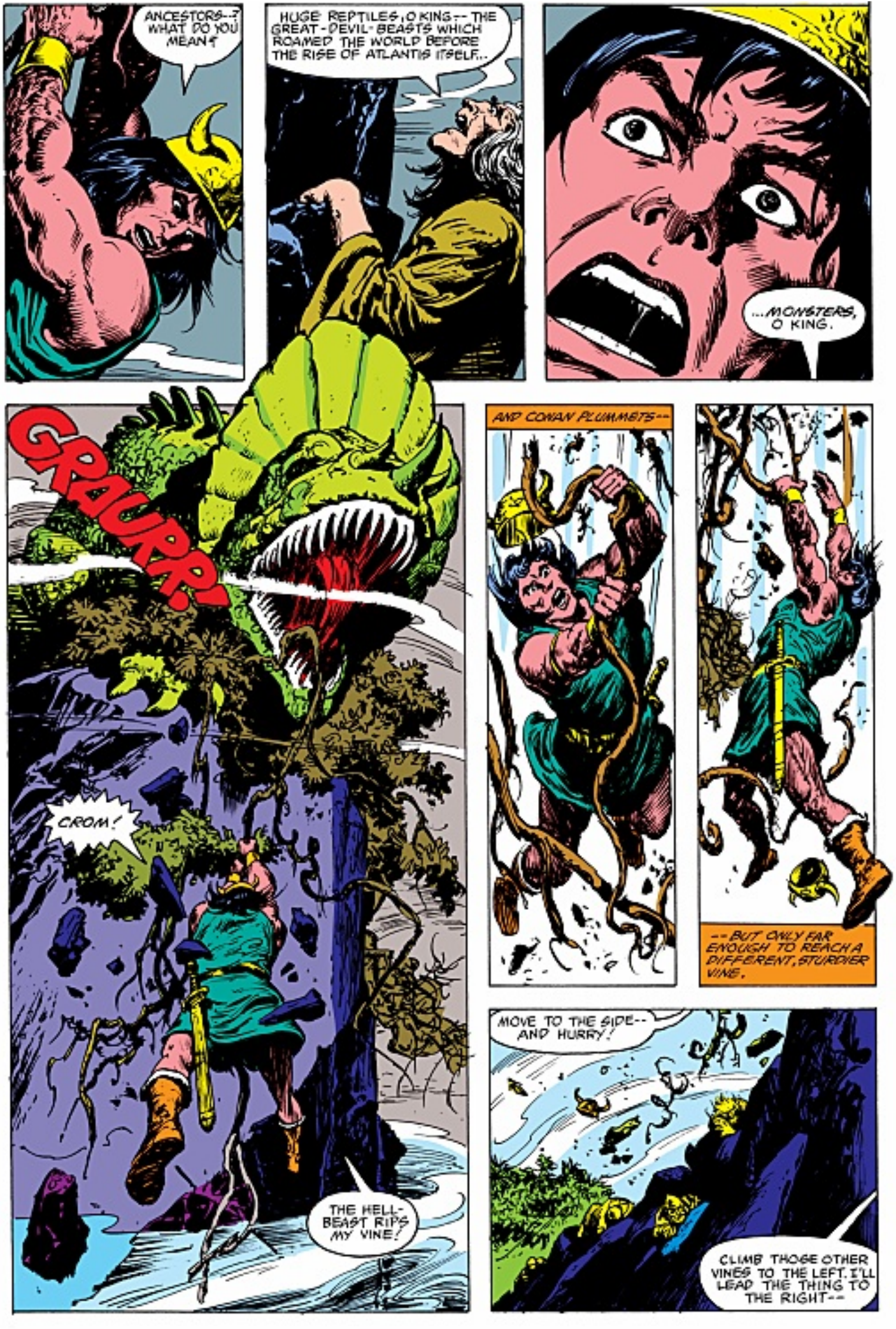
IN CONAN'S THRONEROOM THE FOLLOWING DAY, TROCERO'S WORRIES ARE SOMEWHAT EASED.
RATHER THAN SLEEPING, THE KING HAS AGREED TO FACE THE LINE OF PETITIONERS STRETCHING ALL THE WAY OUT OF THE PALACE AND INTO THE STREET...
--TAXED BY BOTH POITAIN AND AQUILONIA! I AM A POOR FARMER, MY KING, AND CAN-NOT AFFORD TO--
ENOUGH, MAN.
TROCERO--YOU'RE A COUNT OF POITAIN. DOES THIS MAN SPEAK THE TRUTH? IS HE TAXED BY TWO TREASURIES?
AH, YES, O KING. SINCE POITAIN BE-CAME A PROVINCE OF AQUILONIA--
MITRA! YOU MEAN ALL OUR PROVINCES ARE TAXED DOUBLE?!
WHY HAVEN'T I HEARD OF THIS BEFORE?!
YOU, AH, NORMALLY CONFINE YOUR RULE TO THE MILITARY, O KING, AND QUEEN ZENOBIA HANDLES--
I BEG TO INTER-RUPT, MY KING, BUT ZENOBIA IS A FAIR QUEEN WHO REGULARLY RETURNS THE AQUI-LONIAN PORTION OF OUR TAXES. NOW THAT SHE IS GONE, HOWEVER, YESTER-DAY'S COLLECTION BY THE AQUILONIAN TREASURY WAS..
BY CROM, 'TIS MADNESS! HOW MAY AN HONEST MAN BE EXPECTED TO WORK HARD IF HIS COIN IS SEIZED BY THE TAX COLLECTOR? AND ZENOBIA'S DIPLOMACY--!
NO DOUBT IT SOOTHES RUFFLED FEATHERS AND IS THE MOST PRACTICAL SOLUTION BUT, BY CROM, IT BOILS MY BLOOD!

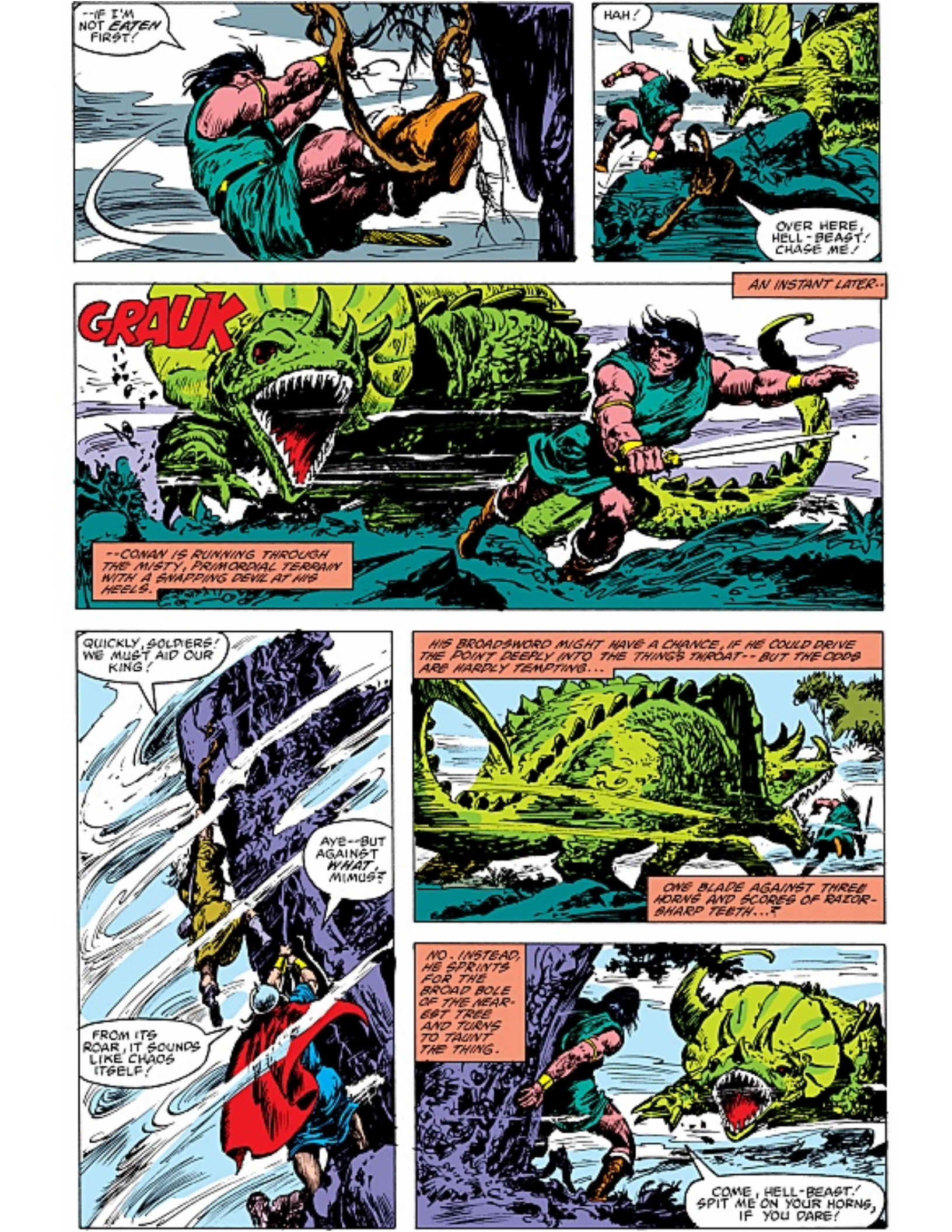
HENCEFORTH A NEW EDICT--EVERY MAN IN THE KINGDOM SHALL PAY A LIKE TAX! IN THOSE PROVINCES UNDER BOTH AQUILONIAN AND LOCAL RULE--
--THE TAX SHALL BE DIVIDED EVENLY BETWEEN THE TWO TREASURIES!
THANK YOU, MY KING--THE ENTIRE REALM THANKS YOU!
CROM'S BLOOD, TROCERO, IS THIS WHAT ZENOBIA MUST DEAL WITH EVERY DAY?
AYE, CONAN, AND DEAL WITH IT SHE DOES--VERY WELL.
THEN SHE'S MADE OF STERNER STUFF THAN I, FOR SUCH MATTERS SUIT ME ILL...AND WOULD DRIVE ME MAD.
ENOUGH PETITIONS FOR ONE DAY!
WHATEVER YOUR REQUESTS OR GRIEVANCES, THEY CAN WAIT FOR ANOTHER TIME--PREFERABLY AFTER QUEEN ZENOBIA RETURNS.
NO, MY KING! PLEASE--!
DO NOT DENY ME MY ONLY RECOURSE! DO NOT DENY MY VERY DAUGHTER!
YOUR DAUGHTER, MAN? WHAT DO YOU--
SHE WAS ABDUCTED LAST NIGHT, O KING, BY FOLLOWERS OF THE SERPENT-GOD, SET! THEY MEAN TO SACRIFICE HER TO THE FATHER OF ALL REPTILES!
THE FOLLOWERS OF SET HERE IN AQUILONIA--IN TARANTIA?
AYE, MY KING, THEY CAN BE FOUND ANYWHERE, OFTEN MASKING THEMSELVES AS GOOD MEN AND TRUE, PRETENDING TO BE FOLLOWERS OF MITRA OR TARIM OR ERLIK--EVEN CROM!
THE SOLDIERS TURNED ME AWAY, O KING, SAYING THEY ARE NOT EMPOWERED TO LEAVE THE CITY'S GATES WITHOUT YOUR AUTHORITY.
YES, YES...

TROCERO, TAKE A SMALL COMPANY OF THE BLACK DRAGONS AND HELP THIS MAN TO FIND HIS--
NO, BY CROM, THIS PALACE AND ITS EMPTY MARBLE HALLS WEARY ME--I'LL LEAD THE EXPEDITION MYSELF!
AS YOU WISH, MY KING, BUT IS IT WISE TO LEAVE THE PALACE NOW THAT YOUR QUEEN AND HEIR--
DUKE PROSPERO WILL SERVE AS REGENT WHILE I'M GONE! TO HORSES, TROCERO--WE'VE FINALLY A CHANCE TO DO SOMETHING!
AND SO, WITHIN THE HOUR...
YOU SAY YOUR NAME IS MIMUS?
YES, O KING, A POOR MERCHANT IN THE SOUTHERN QUARTER OF THE CITY.
I WAS LATE IN TAKING MY INVENTORY LAST NIGHT AND WHEN I RETURNED HOME I SAW THE DEVILS CARRYING DARWEENA OFF INTO THE NIGHT.
AND YOU OVERHEARD THEIR PLANS TO SACRIFICE HER--AS WELL AS THE SITE OF THIS SACRIFICE?
YES--THEY'VE TAKEN HER TO THE PLATEAU OF MIST, NEAR THE EASTERN MOUNTAINS.
I KNOW NO SUCH "PLATEAU OF MIST," MIMUS.
IT EXISTS NONETHELESS, O KING, AND IF YOU WILL INDULGE ME FOR SAYING SO...
...AQUILONIA IS A LARGE KINGDOM, AND HOLDS MANY SECRETS EVEN A WELL-TRAVELED KING MAY NOT KNOW.


IT RISES FROM THE FLAT LANDSCAPE LIKE A SQUAT, BROODING MONUMENT. OF ALL THE EASTERN MOUNTAINS, IT IS THE ONE MOST ISOLATED FROM THE OTHERS AND THE CLOSEST TO TARANTIA...
AND YET, IT IS NOT A TRUE MOUNTAIN AT ALL, FOR ITS TOP IS SHEARED FLAT AND WREATHED IN SLOW-MOVING, MYSTERIOUS VAPORS...
CLOSE ENOUGH NOW TO RECOGNIZE IT, CONAN GRUNTS.
I WAS WRONG. I'VE RIDDEN PAST THIS PLATEAU MANY TIMES, BUT NEVER CLOSE ENOUGH TO REALIZE IT WAS A PLATEAU.
I'D ALWAYS ASSUMED THE TOP MIST-LAYER SHROUDED A NORMAL MOUNTAIN PEAK.
HERE--THIS LOOKS LIKE A GOOD SPOT FOR AN ASCENT. OR NO WORSE THAN ANY OTHER, AT LEAST.
PLANT THE BANNER AND TETHER THE HORSES HERE.
NOW COME, MIMUS, LET'S FIND THAT DAUGHTER DARWEENA OF YOURS...
...BEFORE SHE GETS HER THROAT SLIT FOR THE AMUSEMENT OF SOME FILTHY SERPENT.

THE ASCENT BEGINS SWIFTLY, AND AS THE HILLBORN CIMMERIAN REDISCOVERS HIS NATURAL CLIMBING SKILLS--
--IT PROGRESSES MORE SWIFTLY STILL.
AT LEAST FOR CONAN.
AND BY THE TIME HE GAINS THE UPPERMOST LEDGE, WITHIN REACH OF THE VINES SPILLING DOWN FROM THE PLATEAU...
...HE HAS LEFT THE OTHERS BEHIND.
OUR KING...HE...HE IS LIKE A YOUTH OF FOURTEEN YEARS...!
AYE...OR LIKE AN APE FROM THE JUNGLES OF KUSH!
WHAT CAN WE EXPECT TO FIND UP THERE, MIMUS?
A CARPET OF WRITHING SNAKES?
NOT SNAKES, O KING, BUT THE GREAT ANCESTORS OF ALL SNAKES.
AT LEAST, SO SAY THE FOLLOWERS OF SET.


ANCESTORS--? WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
HUGE REPTILES, O KING-- THE GREAT-DEVIL-BEASTS WHICH ROAMED THE WORLD BEFORE THE RISE OF ATLANTIS ITSELF...
...MONSTERS, O KING.
GRAURR!
CROM!
THE HELL-BEAST RIPS MY VINE!
AND CONAN PLUMMETS--
--BUT ONLY FAR ENOUGH TO REACH A DIFFERENT, STURDIER VINE.
MOVE TO THE SIDE-- AND HURRY!
CLIMB THOSE OTHER VINES TO THE LEFT. I'LL LEAD THE THING TO THE RIGHT--


--IF I'M NOT EATEN FIRST!
HAH!
OVER HERE, HELL-BEAST! CHASE ME!
AN INSTANT LATER..
GRAUK
--CONAN IS RUNNING THROUGH THE MISTY, PRIMORDIAL TERRAIN WITH A SNAPPING DEVIL AT HIS HEELS.
QUICKLY, SOLDIERS! WE MUST AID OUR KING!
AYE--BUT AGAINST WHAT, MIMUS?
FROM ITS ROAR, IT SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS ITSELF!
HIS BROADSWORD MIGHT HAVE A CHANCE, IF HE COULD DRIVE THE POINT DEEPLY INTO THE THING'S THROAT--BUT THE ODDS ARE HARDLY TEMPTING...
ONE BLADE AGAINST THREE HORNS AND SCORES OF RAZOR-SHARP TEETH...?
NO. INSTEAD, HE SPRINTS FOR THE BROAD BOLE OF THE NEAREST TREE AND TURNS TO TAUNT THE THING.
COME, HELL-BEAST! SPIT ME ON YOUR HORNS, IF YOU DARE!

THE MONSTER THUNDERS FORWARD RED EYES GLARING--
--AND CONAN LEAPS ASIDE AT THE LAST POSSIBLE MOMENT.
MITRA! THE FORCE OF ITS BLOW ALMOST OVERTURNED THAT TREE...

THEN, SINCE THE MASSIVE TREE IS ONLY PARTIALLY UPROOTED...
...CONAN PLANTS HIS FEET STRAINING FORWARD WITH HIS BULGING THEWS...

...TO COMPLETE THE TASK.
GREEAUK

NOW, DEVIL...
WITH YOUR HORNS PINNED, THE ODDS FAVOR MY BLADE!

I... I DON'T BELIEVE IT! THE KING... HE...HE... SLAYS THE MONSTER!
MITRA! THE SIZE OF IT! OH, MY DAUGHTER--MY POOR DARWEENA!
CONAN--! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?!

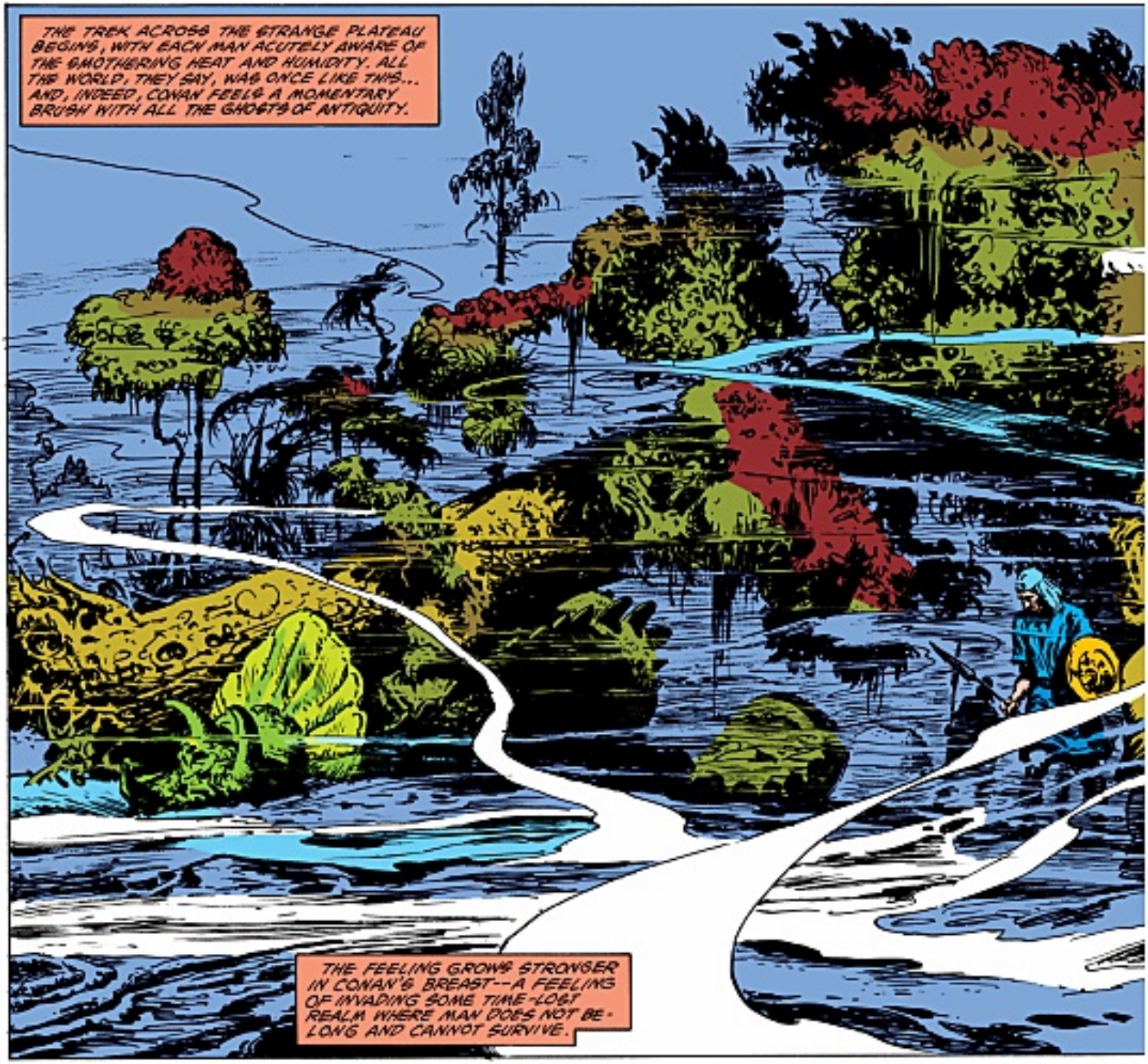
AYE, TROCERO--I'M HARDLY WEARY, AND THE BEAST IS DEAD.
SORCERY, MY KING!
NAY, TROCERO - A LARGE BEAST, ALL RIGHT, BUT JUST THAT--A BEAST LIKE ANY OTHER, AND NOTHING SORCEROUS ABOUT IT.
I'VE SEEN SUCH THINGS BEFORE--THEY'RE RARE, BUT POCKETS OF THEM HAVE SURVIVED HERE AND THERE, MOSTLY FAR TO THE SOUTH WHERE THE CLIME IS WARMER...

THIS SO-CALLED "MIST" EXPLAINS HOW THE BEAST COULD SURVIVE THIS FAR NORTH--AND EXPLAINS THE TROPICAL JUNGLE AS WELL.

IT'S REALLY HOT VAPORS SEEPING FROM THE GROUND--EVEN THE GROUND ITSELF IS WARM!
AYE--'TIS INDEED HOT UP HERE, BUT HOW CAN YOU EXPLAIN IT?
THE PHILOSOPHER ALCEMIDES HAS TOLD ME OF THE MOUNTAINS WHICH SMOKE AND ERUPT HOT, LIQUID ROCK. HE CALLS THEM VOLCANOES...

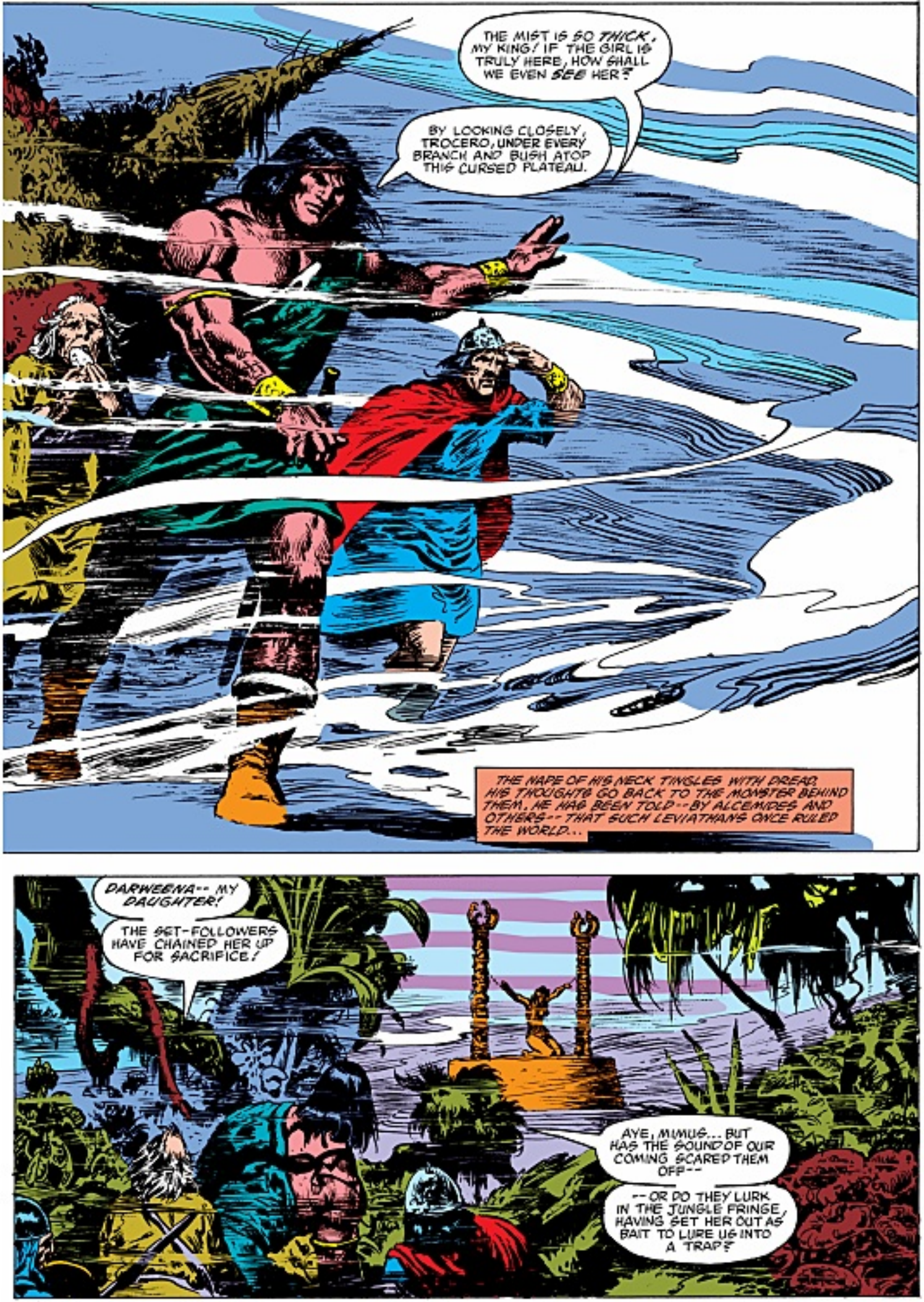
MAYHAP THIS IS ONE SUCH VOLCANO WHICH HAS FILLED ITSELF WITH ERUPTIONS--COOLED AND SOLID ON THE SURFACE, YET STILL BUBBLING HOT UNDERNEATH, CREATING THE STEAM AND HOT CLIMATE.

WELL, LET'S GET MOVING IF WE'RE TO FIND THIS VIRGINAL DAUGHTER OF YOURS, MIMUS.
IN A MOMENT, O KING--BUT FIRST I MUST HAVE A BIT OF SWEETMEAT.
IT IS LIKE AN ADDICTION WITH ME... AND WHEN I BECOME NERVOUS, THE CRAVING STRIKES ALL THE HARDER.
A CURIOUS MAN, THIS MIMUS...BUT CONAN SUSPECTS NO MORE.


THE TREK ACROSS THE STRANGE PLATEAU BEGINS, WITH EACH MAN ACUTELY AWARE OF THE SMOTHERING HEAT AND HUMIDITY. ALL THE WORLD, THEY SAY, WAS ONCE LIKE THIS... AND, INDEED, CONAN FEELS A MOMENTARY BRUSH WITH ALL THE GHOSTS OF ANTIQUITY.
THE FEELING GROWS STRONGER IN CONAN'S BREAST--A FEELING OF INVADING SOME TIME-LOST REALM WHERE MAN DOES NOT BELONG AND CANNOT SURVIVE.

UP HERE ON THIS MIST-CLOAKED PLATEAU, HE CAN BELIEVE IT.
THE PLACE IS THICK WITH MONSTERS.
QUIETLY NOW--I'VE NO CRAVING TO PROVE MYSELF AGAINST ANOTHER SUCH AS THEM.
BUT IF THIS IS THE WORLD AS IT ONCE WAS, ITS PRIMORDIAL WONDER BOTH REPELS HIS RATIONAL MIND AND STIRS HIS SAVAGE HEART...

IT TEEMS WITH LIFE--THE GHASTLY LIFE OF BAD DREAMS, TO BE SURE, BUT STILL...
WAIT.
IN THE CLEARING AHEAD.


THE MIST IS SO THICK, MY KING! IF THE GIRL IS TRULY HERE, HOW SHALL WE EVEN SEE HER?
BY LOOKING CLOSELY, TROCERO, UNDER EVERY BRANCH AND BUSH ATOP THIS CURSED PLATEAU.
THE NAPE OF HIS NECK TINGLES WITH DREAD. HIS THOUGHTS GO BACK TO THE MONSTER BEHIND THEM. HE HAS BEEN TOLD--BY ALCEMIDES AND OTHERS--THAT SUCH LEVIATHANS ONCE RULED THE WORLD...
DARWEENA--MY DAUGHTER!
THE SET-FOLLOWERS HAVE CHAINED HER UP FOR SACRIFICE!
AYE, MUMUS... BUT HAS THE SOUND OF OUR COMING SCARED THEM OFF--
--OR DO THEY LURK IN THE JUNGLE FRINGE, HAVING SET HER OUT AS BAIT TO LURE US INTO A TRAP?

GRAWRRR
EEEEE
AYE, TROCERO...
SAVE HER, MY KING! YOU MUST SAVE MY DAUGHTER!
CONAN! SOMETHING COMES--SOMETHING LARGE ENOUGH TO SHAKE THE VERY GROUND!

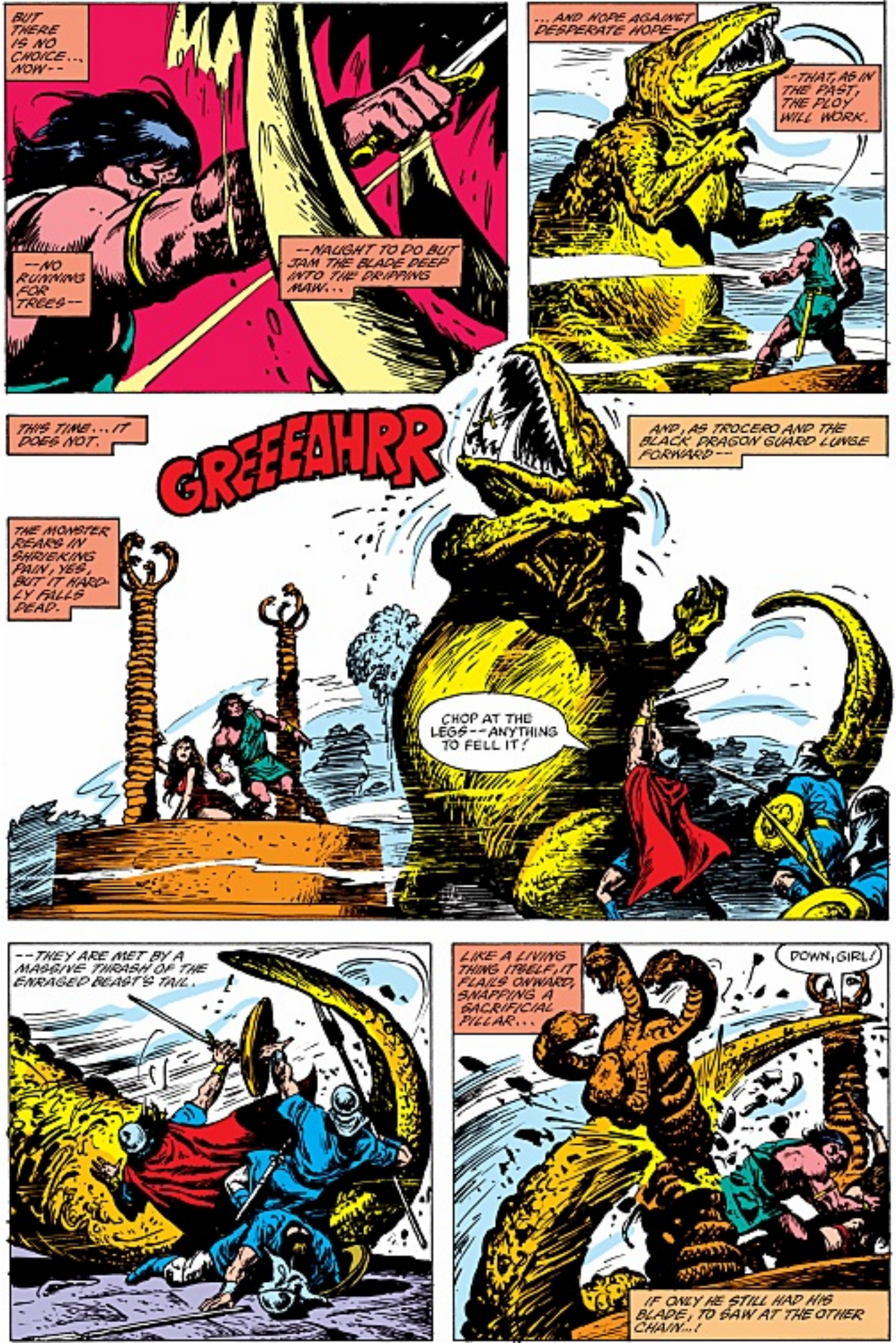
AYE, MIMIR-- TRAP OR NOT, WE CAN'T LEAVE HER OUT THERE AS A HELPLESS MORSEL FOR SOME DEVIL-BEAST'S BELLY!
CONAN--MY KING!
YOU--?!
AYE, GIRL--THE THRONE BORED ME.

AND THANK CROM, THIS CHAIN IS OLD AND WEAK...

I SPOKE TOO SOON, GIRL--THE OTHER CHAIN IS NEWER, TOO STRONG FOR MY BLADE...
NOW THE JUNGLE THRASHES OFF TO THEIR LEFT...

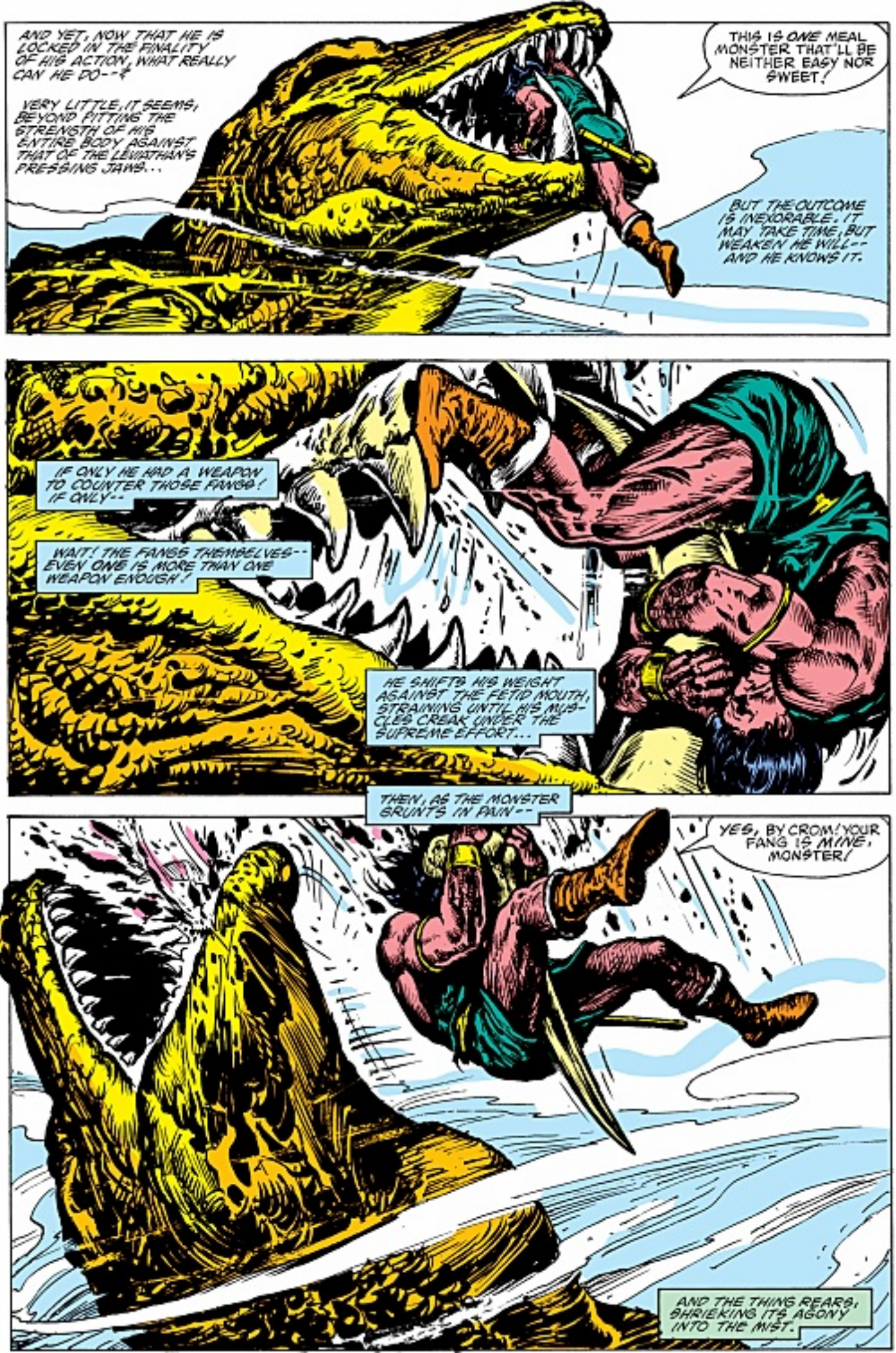
...THE STONE DAIS SHAKES AND TREMBLES...
NOOO!!
GRAWRRR
...AND THE STARK FACE OF HORROR LOOMS BEFORE THEM.

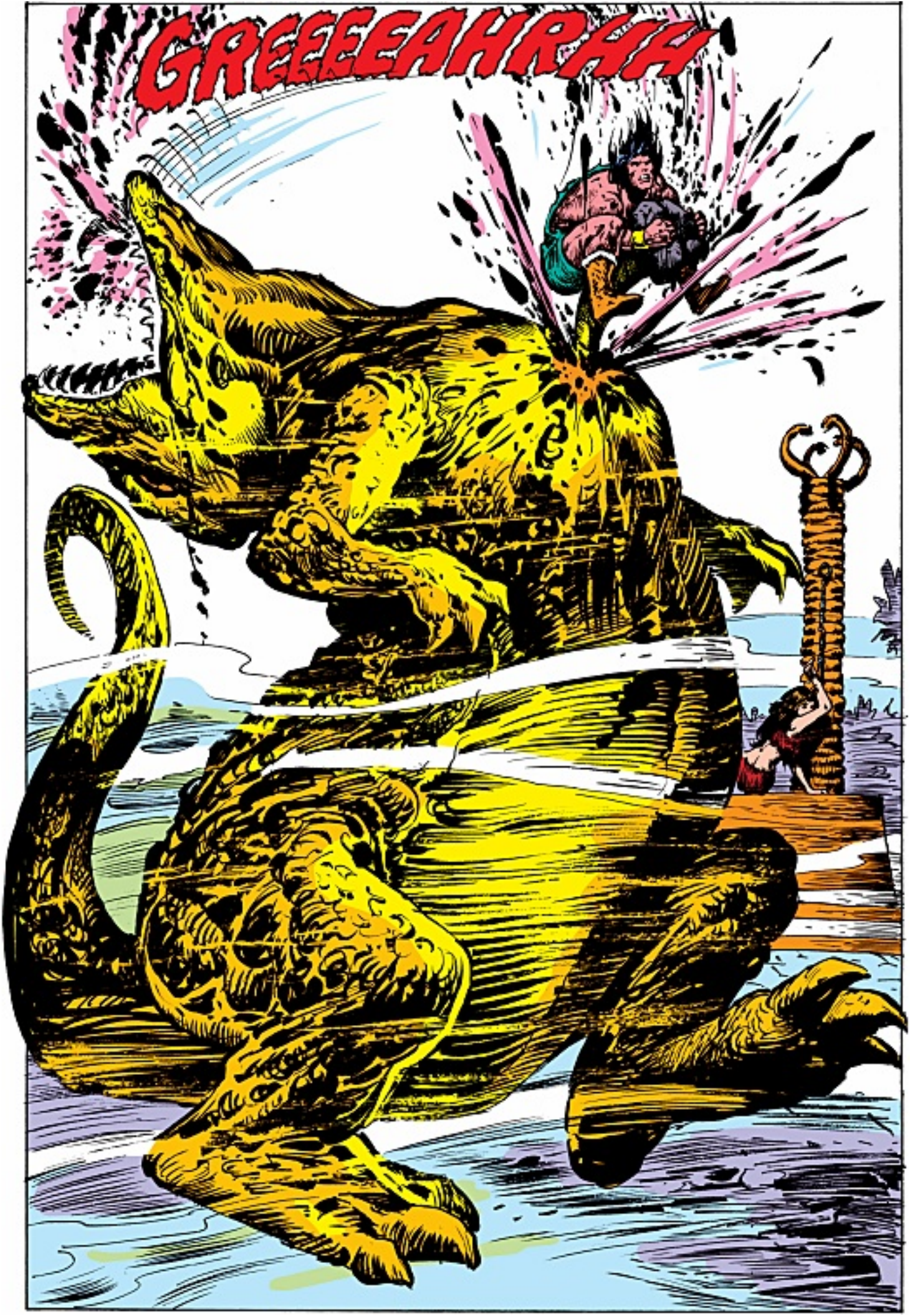
NO TRAP OF MAN, THIS! NAY, NIMUS SPOKE THE TRUTH -- IT IS NOTHING LESS THAN A SACRIFICE TO THE GREAT ANCESTOR OF ALL SERPENTS, LOATHSOME IN ITS NIGHTMARE MAJESTY.
CROM AND MITRA!
AGAIN THE GIRL SHRIEKS -- BUT EVEN THOUGH CONAN'S OWN HEART GROWS COLD WITH NATURAL FEAR, THIS WILL HARDLY BE A WILLING SACRIFICE, NOR EVEN A PASSIVE ONE.
GET BACK, GIRL -- AS FAR BEHIND THE PILLAR AS THE CHAIN WILL PERMIT!
THE SAME ODDS SPURNED EARLIER...
ONE BLADE AGAINST FAR TOO MANY FANGS.


BUT THERE IS NO CHOICE... NOW--
--NO RUNNING FOR TREES--
--NAUGHT TO DO BUT JAM THE BLADE DEEP INTO THE DRIPPING MAW...
...AND HOPE AGAINST DESPERATE HOPE--
--THAT, AS IN THE PAST, THE PLOY WILL WORK.
THIS TIME... IT DOES NOT.
GREEEAHRR
AND, AS TROCERO AND THE BLACK DRAGON GUARD LUNGE FORWARD--
THE MONSTER REARS IN SHRIEKING PAIN, YES, BUT IT HARDLY FALLS DEAD.
CHOP AT THE LEGS--ANYTHING TO FELL IT!
--THEY ARE MET BY A MASSIVE THRASH OF THE ENRAGED BEAST'S TAIL.
LIKE A LIVING THING ITSELF, IT FLAILS ONWARD, SNAPPING A SACRIFICIAL PILLAR...
DOWN, GIRL!
IF ONLY HE STILL HAD HIS BLADE, TO SAW AT THE OTHER CHAIN...!

AND THEN, AS IF NO MORE THAN A FLEETING ANNOYANCE, THE SWORD IS PLUCKED OUT--
--CLUMPING TO THE GROUND SOME TWENTY PACES DISTANT.
HE WONDERS: COULD HE REACH IT IN TIME--?
NO--NOT WITHOUT SACRIFICING DARWEENA TO THOSE HIDEOUS FANGS.
STAY DOWN, GIRL! USE THE PILLAR FOR PROTECTION!
THEN, SINCE THERE IS NOTHING BETTER TO DO--

--CONAN THE KING LEAPS STRAIGHT INTO THE JAWS OF HELL.
THE STRUGGLE WILL BE DESPERATE, HE KNOWS, NEAR-DOOMED...
BUT STRUGGLE HE SHALL--
--EYES HARD AND TEETH BARED IN THE GRIN OF WOLVES.


AND YET, NOW THAT HE IS LOCKED IN THE FINALITY OF HIS ACTION, WHAT REALLY CAN HE DO--?
VERY LITTLE, IT SEEMS, BEYOND PITTING THE STRENGTH OF HIS ENTIRE BODY AGAINST THAT OF THE LEVIATHAN'S PRESSING JAWS...
THIS IS ONE MEAL MONSTER THAT'LL BE NEITHER EASY NOR SWEET!
BUT THE OUTCOME IS INEXORABLE. IT MAY TAKE TIME, BUT WEAKEN HE WILL-- AND HE KNOWS IT.
IF ONLY HE HAD A WEAPON TO COUNTER THOSE FANGS! IF ONLY--
WAIT! THE FANGS THEMSELVES-- EVEN ONE IS MORE THAN ONE WEAPON ENOUGH!
HE SHIFTS HIS WEIGHT AGAINST THE FETID MOUTH, STRAINING UNTIL HIS MUSCLES CREAK UNDER THE SUPREME EFFORT...
THEN, AS THE MONSTER GRUNTS IN PAIN--
YES, BY CROM! YOUR FANG IS MINE, MONSTER!
AND THE THING REARS, SHRIEKING ITS AGONY INTO THE MIST.


GREEEAHRHH

IT'S DEAD.
AND THEN HIS STEELY BLUE EYES DART TO A NAGGING, UNFINISHED TASK...

NOW, CURSED CHAIN...
BREAK!

MITRA! I... I NEVER SAW... ANYTHING LIKE--
ENOUGH, TROCERO!

WE STILL HAVEN'T FOUND THE FOLLOWERS OF SET SAID TO BE SKULKING IN THIS DEMON-MIST...
... THE ONES WHO ABDUCTED THIS GIRL, AND THOUGHT TO WASTE HER BLOOD ON A CRUDE ALTAR.

AND AFTER WHAT THEY JUST CAUSED, BY CROM, DON'T THINK MY HANDS AREN'T ITCHING TO GET HOLD OF THEM.
YOU TWO -- STAY WITH THE GIRL AND HER FATHER. AND CLOSE YOUR GAPING MOUTHS, FOOLS!

I COULD HAVE BEEN KILLED! IF IT HAD NOT BEEN FOR CONAN, "DEAR" FATHER--
YOU KNEW THE RISKS. NOW BE SILENT LEST THE GUARDS HEAR YOU. WE MUST FIND SOME OTHER WAY TO ELIMINATE THE BARBARIAN...
HOW--? YOU SAW WHAT HE DID TO THE FATHER OF SET!

YESSS... AND MAYHAP THE FATHER OF SET CAN STILL SPELL HIS END. THAT FANG WILL MAKE A POWERFUL FETISH--A SUPREME FOCUS FOR THE POWERS OF DARKNESS...
YESSS... NEVER HAS MY SWEETMEAT TASTED SO GOOD.
LONG HOURS LATER, AS CONAN LEADS HIS MEN BACK TO THE CLEARING...
WELL, WE TRIED, BUT IF THEY'RE STILL UP HERE, IT COULD TAKE WEEKS TO FIND THEM.
AYE, AND LIKELY AS NOT THEY FLED UPON HEARING OUR APPROACH--OR THE MONSTER'S, APPROACH.
IF FATE BE JUST, THEY WERE DEVOURED BY THAT THING'S SISTER...
EH--? WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH YON TOOTH, MIMUS?
I WISH TO USE IT FOR SCRIMSHAW, O KING.
SCRIMSHAW--?
YES--THE ART OF ETCHING OR CARVING ON BONES OR TEETH. I WOULD CARVE THEE A TROPHY FROM THE FANG, O KING--
--IN GRATITUDE FOR SAVING DARWEENA'S LIFE... WITH YOUR PERMISSION, OF COURSE.
A TROPHY IS NOT NECESSARY, MIMUS, BUT IF YOU WANT TO HAUL THE THING ALL THE WAY BACK TO TARANTIA, I WILL NOT STOP YOU.
AS FOR ME... ALL I CRAVE, FOR ONCE, IS THE PEACE OF THE PALACE.
YES, MY KING, THE RETURN TO TARANTIA WILL BE MOST WELCOME--ALL MY SWEETMEAT YOU SEE, IS GONE.

BUT THE TRIUMPHANT RETURN IS MARRED BY SMOKE AND RUIN...
CROM'S BLOOD! WHAT THE DEVIL HAPPENED HERE?!

PROSPERO--EXPLAIN THIS SCENE!
I'M NOT BLIND, MAN! WHAT KIND OF DISTURBANCE?
THERE WAS A DISTURBANCE IN YOUR ABSENCE, O KING.

A MINOR UPRISING--REBELS--THEY TRIED TO STORM THE PALACE AND USURP POWER.
BUT IT WAS HOPELESSLY DOOMED, ALMOST PATHETIC.

I SEE NO PATHOS, PROSPERO, IN THE FACT THAT SUCH REBELS EVEN EXIST TO TRY.
NO KING, MY LIEGE, HOWEVER JUST HIS HEART OR PROSPEROUS HIS NATION, CAN PLEASE ALL THE PEOPLE. BUT TAKE HEART--AND PRIDE IN ONE FACT...

THE REBELS APPEALED TO YOUR IRON LEGIONS FOR SUPPORT, BUT THE MEN STOOD FIRM. NOT A SINGLE ONE AMONG THEM WAS EVEN TEMPTED TO JOIN THE WOULD-BE USURPERS.
CONAN IS PLEASED, BUT LOATHE TO SHOW IT. HE SPEAKS GRUFFLY INSTEAD...
HMP. CARRY ON THEN WITH THE CLEAN-UP, PROSPERO.

BUT AS HE RIDES OFF FOR THE PALACE, HE SPEAKS MORE SOFTLY TO THE FRIEND AT HIS SIDE...
'TIS MADNESS, EH TROCERO? THE QUEEN LEAVES THE PALACE AND THE ENTIRE KINGDOM SEEMS TO FALL APART.
NOT YET, BARBARIAN-KING, BUT SOON... VERY SOON...
"... INDEED... WITHIN THE WEEK."
WELL, MIMUS, I SEE YOU'VE KEPT HOLD OF YOUR DAUGHTER, SO WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THIS PETITION?
THE TROPHY OF WHICH I SPOKE, O KING.
I HAVE DONE NOTHING THIS PAST WEEK BUT WORK DAY AND NIGHT ON IT.
IT IS HOPED THAT MY CRAFTSMANSHIP IS SUFFICIENT TO PLEASE THE KING--
--AND THAT THE SCRIMSHAW TROPHY WILL SERVE AS BOTH A TESTAMENT OF MY GRATITUDE--
--AND AS A SYMBOL FOR ALL TO SEE THE GREAT FEAT PERFORMED BY KING CONAN ATOP THE PLATEAU OF MIST.
CONAN STARTS FORWARD, CLEARLY AWED BY THE CARVING...
MAYHAP YOU HAVE MISSED YOUR CALLING, MIMUS. RATHER THAN A MERE MERCHANT, YOU COULD WELL BE AN ARTIST. YOUR WORK SHALL BE PERMANENTLY DISPLAYED RIGHT HERE IN THE THRONEROOM.

YOU DO ME GREAT HONOR, O KING, AND NOW, IF YOU WILL PERMIT, I HAVE CARVED ANOTHER--SMALLER AND MORE PERSONAL--PRIZE FROM ONE OF THE FANG'S WASTE-CHIPS.
WILL YOU ALLOW MY DAUGHTER PARWEENA TO PLACE IT AROUND YOUR NECK...?

AYE--IF IT'S OF LIKE QUALITY, MIMUS, I SHALL BE PROUD TO WEAR IT.
I WOULD AGAIN THANK THEE FOR SAVING MY LIFE, O KING.
THE WORDS ARE BARELY MURMURED BY THE STRANGELY SUBDUED GIRL, YET CONAN EITHER FAILS TO NOTE HER MOOD...

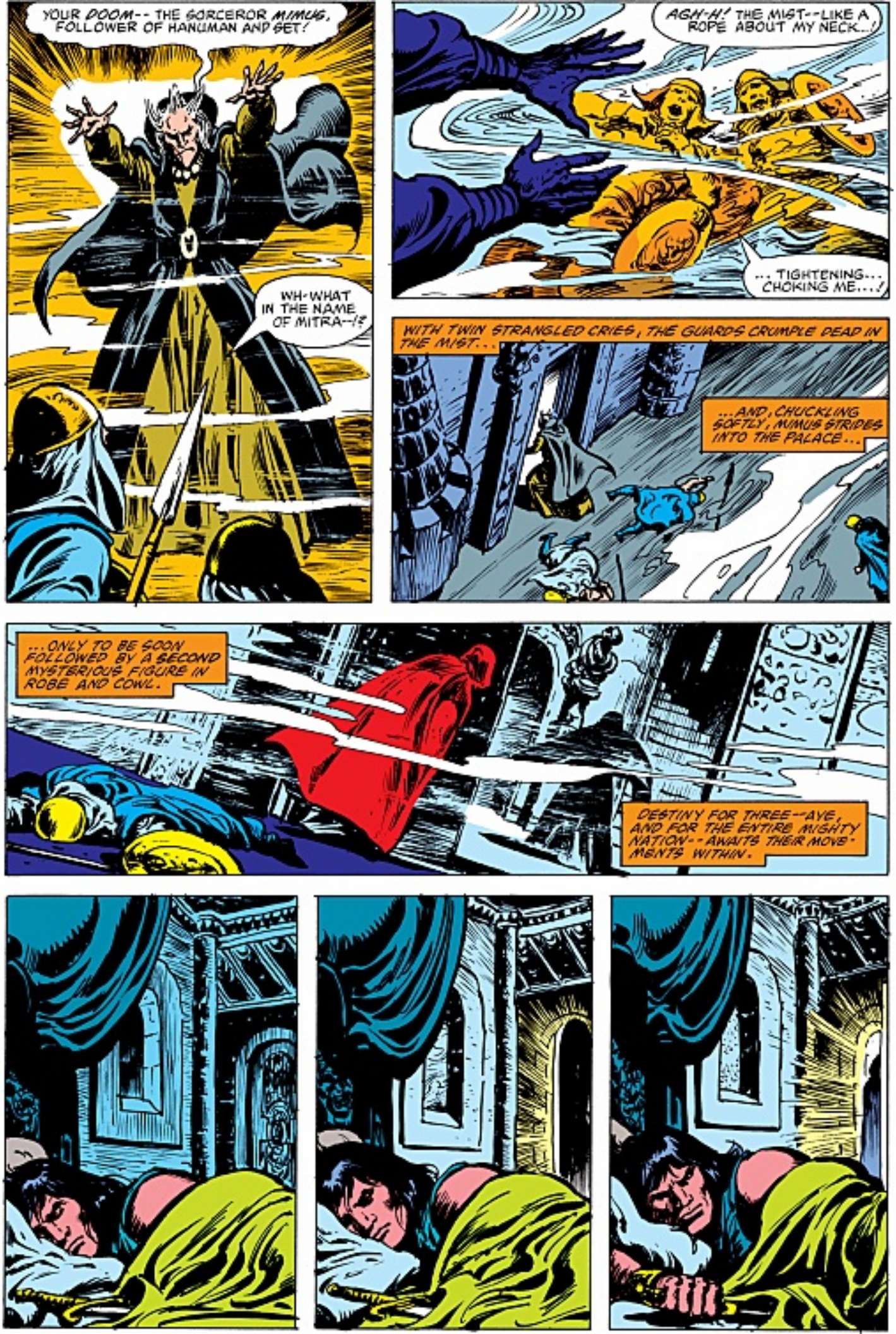
...OR DISMISSES IT AS THE SHYNESS OF A YOUNG GIRL CONFRONTING HER KING.
HAH! THE QUALITY IS OF A LIKE KIND, MIMUS!
AND I PROMISE YOU I SHALL WEAR IT, AT LEAST UNTIL ZENOBIA RETURNS HOME.

AFTER THAT... WELL, IF THE BRUTE SCARES HER AWAY FROM MY BREAST, I'M SURE YOU'LL UNDERSTAND...
INDEED, O KING--A MERE BAUBLE MEANT TO GIVE YOU AMUSEMENT FOR A FEW DAYS.
AND NOW, FAREWELL--MAY THY HEALTH BE AS UNFAILING AS MY GRATITUDE.

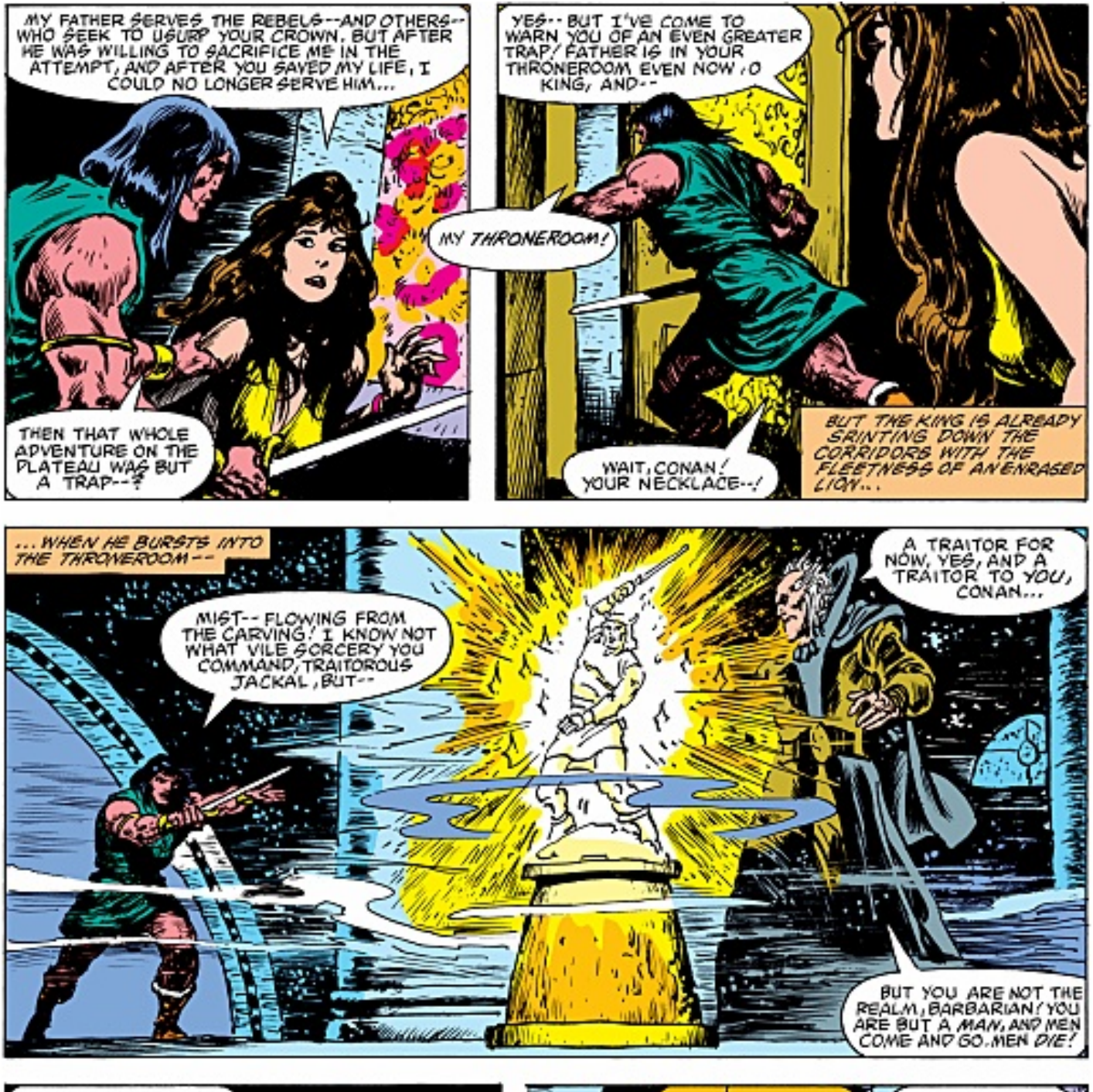
THAT NIGHT, AFTER FEASTING, FINDS CONAN IN A RARE GARRULOUS MOOD...
YOUR NEW NECKLACE REMINDS ME OF OUR ADVENTURE ON THE PLATEAU, CONAN...
AYE, TROCERO, WHICH IN TURN REMINDS ME OF MY YOUTH.

SOMEHOW, FRIEND TROCERO, I ALWAYS KNEW I'D RISE TO BECOME A KING... YET I THINK THE LONG PATH TO THE THRONE WAS MORE REWARDING THAN THE REWARD ITSELF.
OH, I'D NEVER TURN IN MY CROWN, NOT AFTER WHAT IT COST ME TO GAIN... BUT I'M STILL MORE SUITED FOR THE HUNT, I THINK... FOR ADVENTURE AND DANGER...

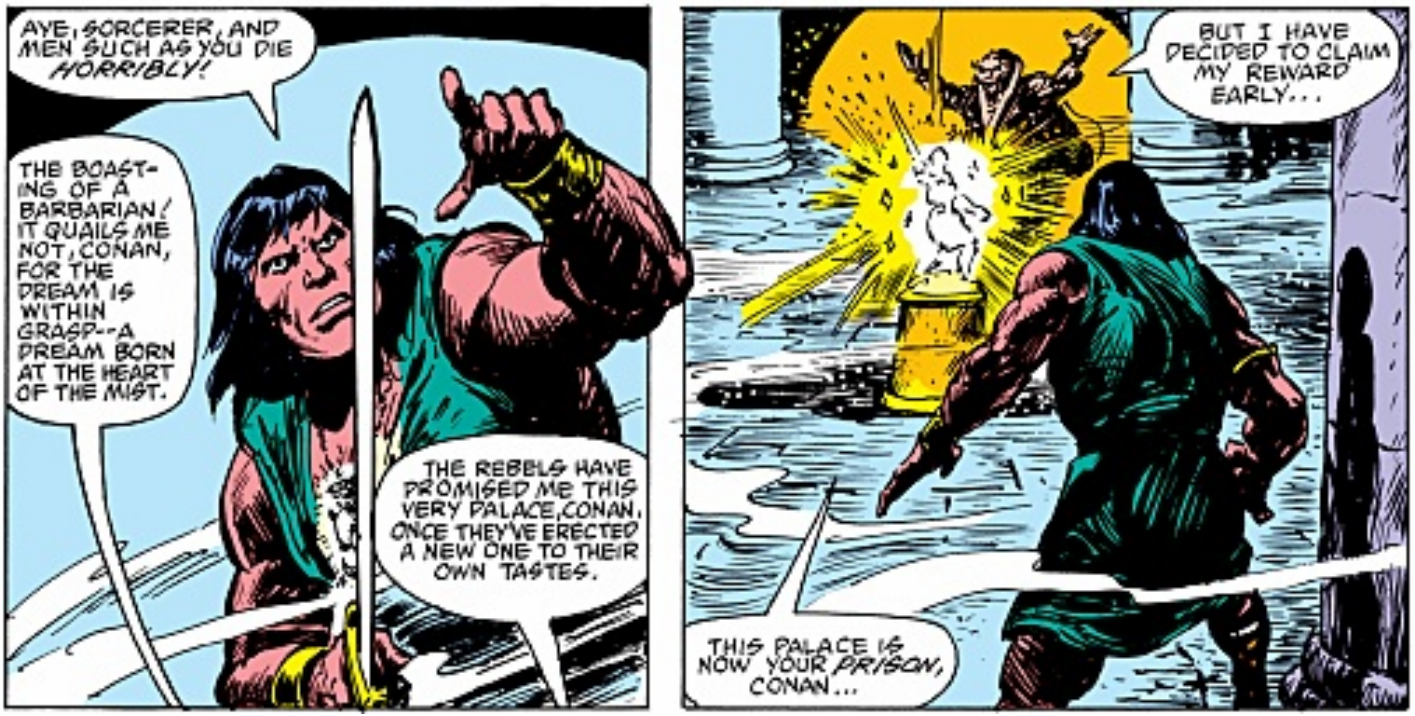
IT'S WHAT DRIVES ME AS A MAN... MAKES MY HEART BEAT STRONG AND GIVES MEANING TO MY FLESH...
AND YET, CONAN, FOR A KING, YOU'VE DONE WELL BY YOURSELF IN PRESERVING AN AIR OF DANGER AND ADVENTURE.
HAH! I CAN'T HELP IT, CAN I? STILL, I'LL BE GLAD WHEN ZENOBIA RETURNS ON THE MORROW-- TO SHAKE THIS KINGDOM BACK IN ORDER.
GOOD NIGHT, TROCERO. SLEEP WELL.
BUT AS THE KING HIMSELF SLUMBERS IN HIS LONELY BEDCHAMBER, DREAMING PERHAPS OF THAT GLORY THAT WAS HIS ON THE PLATEAU...
...THE SYMBOL OF THAT GLORY IN THE HUSHED THRONEROOM--
--BEGINS TO SHIMMER.
THE GLOW FADES...
...AND A THICK, VAPOROUS MIASMA SEEPS FROM THE FORMER FANG.
OUTSIDE, AT THE PALACE ENTRANCE, THE TWO BLACK DRAGON GUARDS ARE UTTERLY MYSTIFIED...
THIS FOG... MIST... HOW DID IT ARISE SO FAST?!
AYE--'TIS LIKE WITCHERY!
THEN, STRIDING SILENTLY TOWARD THEM THROUGH THE THICK AND SINUOUS VEIL...
HALT! WHO GOES THERE?!


YOUR DOOM-- THE SORCEROR MIMUS, FOLLOWER OF HANUMAN AND SET!
WH-WHAT IN THE NAME OF MITRA--!?
AGH-H! THE MIST--LIKE A ROPE ABOUT MY NECK...!
...TIGHTENING... CHOKING ME...!
WITH TWIN STRANGLED CRIES, THE GUARDS CRUMPLE DEAD IN THE MIST...
...AND, CHUCKLING SOFTLY, MIMUS STRIDES INTO THE PALACE...
...ONLY TO BE SOON FOLLOWED BY A SECOND MYSTERIOUS FIGURE IN ROBE AND COWL.
DESTINY FOR THREE--AYE, AND FOR THE ENTIRE MIGHTY NATION--AWAITS THEIR MOVEMENTS WITHIN.

STAND FAST, CUR!
WHO DARES INVADE MY BED-CHAMBER?
'TIS ME, O KING...
DARWEENA!
AH, COME TO SHOW YOUR GRATITUDE IN A MORE FULSOME MANNER, EH? I'M FLATTERED, GIRL... BUT, THOUGH SHE IS AWAY, I DO HAVE A QUEEN...
WAIT A MOMENT! HOW DID YOU GET IN HERE-- PAST THE GUARDS? ANSWER ME, GIRL, OR BY CROM, I'LL--
THE GUARDS ARE DEAD, CONAN. MY FATHER SLEW THEM TO GAIN ENTRANCE...
YOUR FATHER?! MIMUS--?
YES--AND HE HAS TRANSPLANTED YOUR VERY PALACE INTO SOME MISTY NETHER REALM OF SORCERY! I ENTERED JUST IN TIME!
CROM!
CHANGE OF GUARDS! HOW WENT THE WATCH THIS--
MOTHER OF MITRA!! THE FORMER WATCH--THEY'RE DEAD!
AND THE PALACE--! MITRA HELP US, BUT IT... IT'S GONE!


MY FATHER SERVES THE REBELS--AND OTHERS--WHO SEEK TO USURP YOUR CROWN. BUT AFTER HE WAS WILLING TO SACRIFICE ME IN THE ATTEMPT, AND AFTER YOU SAVED MY LIFE, I COULD NO LONGER SERVE HIM...
THEN THAT WHOLE ADVENTURE ON THE PLATEAU WAS BUT A TRAP--?
YES-- BUT I'VE COME TO WARN YOU OF AN EVEN GREATER TRAP! FATHER IS IN YOUR THRONEROOM EVEN NOW, O KING, AND--
MY THRONEROOM!
WAIT, CONAN! YOUR NECKLACE--!
BUT THE KING IS ALREADY SPRINTING DOWN THE CORRIDORS WITH THE FLEETNESS OF AN ENRAGED LION...

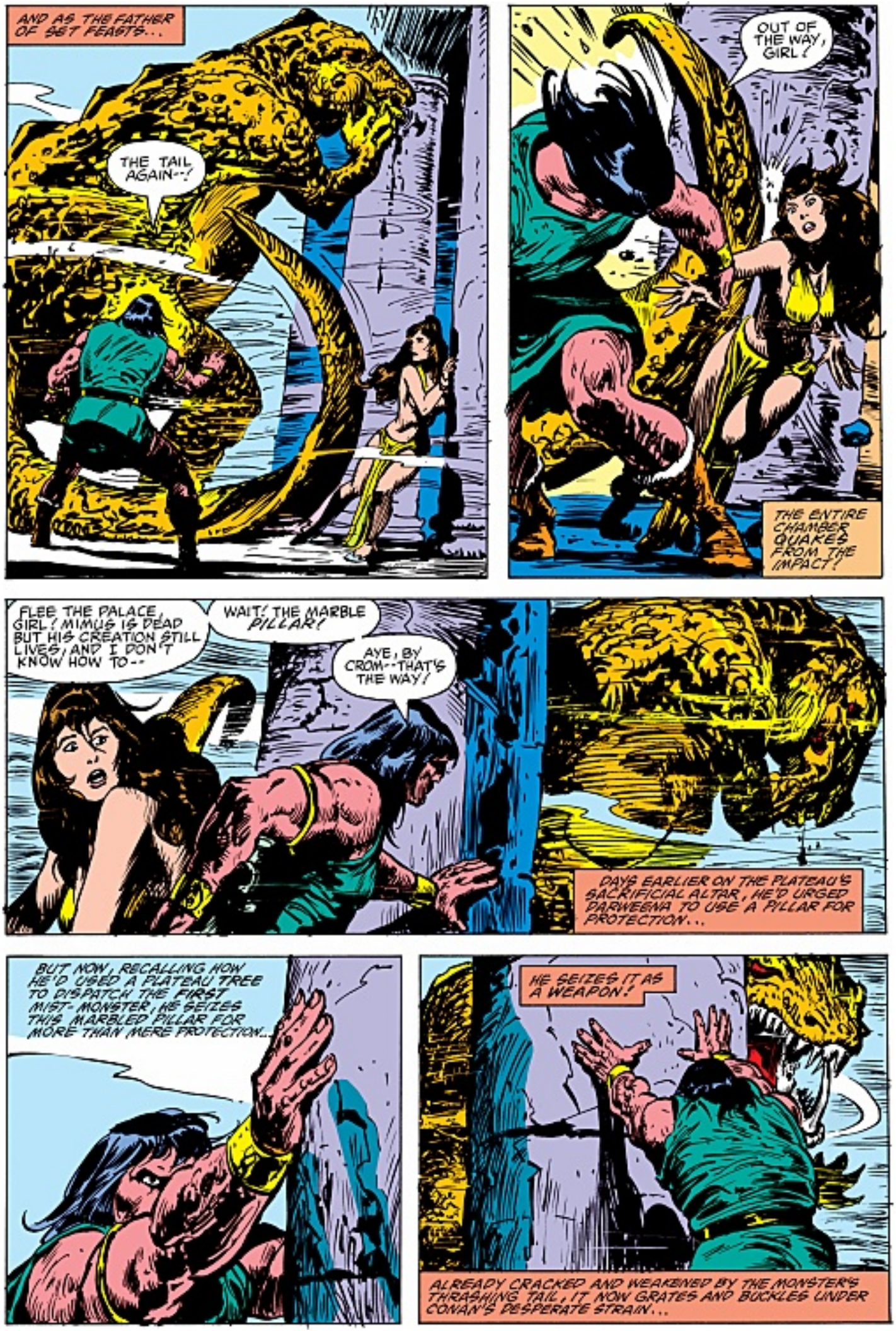
...WHEN HE BURSTS INTO THE THRONEROOM--
MIST-- FLOWING FROM THE CARVING! I KNOW NOT WHAT VILE SORCERY YOU COMMAND, TRAITOROUS JACKAL, BUT--
A TRAITOR FOR NOW, YES, AND A TRAITOR TO YOU, CONAN...
BUT YOU ARE NOT THE REALM, BARBARIAN! YOU ARE BUT A MAN, AND MEN COME AND GO. MEN DIE!


AYE, SORCERER, AND MEN SUCH AS YOU DIE HORRIBLY!
THE BOASTING OF A BARBARIAN! IT QUAILS ME NOT, CONAN, FOR THE DREAM IS WITHIN GRASP--A DREAM BORN AT THE HEART OF THE MIST.
THE REBELS HAVE PROMISED ME THIS VERY PALACE, CONAN, ONCE THEY'VE ERECTED A NEW ONE TO THEIR OWN TASTES.
BUT I HAVE DECIDED TO CLAIM MY REWARD EARLY...
THIS PALACE IS NOW YOUR PRISON, CONAN...

...YOUR PRISON AND YOUR TOMB!
THE MIASMA EXPLODES, A SWIFT AND SOUNDLESS BLOSSOM OF MAGICK...
AFTER ALL, YOU DO NOT REALLY THINK I SCHEMED TO PLACE THE FANG OF SET IN YOUR THRONEROOM--
--AS A MERE TROPHY, DO YOU?
THE MIST--! IT TAKES ON A SHAPE!
AYE, BARBARIAN-KING, THE SHAPE OF YOUR DOOM...
THE FATHER OF SET--REBORN!!
GREEEAHRR
AND RECLAIMED IN ITS GAPING MAW--
--THE STOLEN AND RESHAPED FANG.

CONAN, THOUGH NEVER FEARING ANY MAN OR BEAST, HAS EVER RECOILED FROM SORCERY WITH THE ATAVISTIC DREAD OF ANY MAN BARBARIAN BORN.
YET ON THIS OCCASION, EVEN AS HE SPRINGS FORWARD TO SLASH AT THE TOWERING MONSTER, HE CURBS HIS INSTINCTIVE FEAR WITH RATIONAL THOUGHT...
IF THIS IS INDEED THE SAME MONSTER REBORN, THEN THERE IS NOTHING ARCANE ABOUT IT-- THE SORCERY IS CONFINED MERELY TO THE MANNER OF ITS RESURRECTION. AND IF IT IS SIMPLE FIERCE FLESH HE FACES...
WELL, HE CONQUERED IT ONCE.
AND THIS TIME, BY ALL THE GODS NAMED AND NAMELESS OF HIS NORTHERN HOMELAND, HE HAS NO INTENTION OF SURRENDERING HIS BROADSWORD.
BUT THIS TIME, TOO, AS UPON HIS FIRST ENCOUNTER...
...HIS BLADE, EVEN FIRMLY IN HAND, SEEMS POWERLESS AGAINST SO HUGE A MENACE.
YOUR PLIGHT IS HOPELESS, CONAN! NO MAN CAN TWICE DO WHAT YOU DID ONCE!
INDEED, THE MONSTER KEEPS COMING BACK AT HIM, SNAPPING THOSE TERRIBLE JAWS TIME AND AGAIN...
AND CONAN CANNOT SHAKE THE GRIM FEELING THAT HE IS SOMEHOW FIGHTING HIMSELF--LITERALLY AS WELL AS SYMBOLICALLY...

FOR ALL HIS SLASHING AND HACKING, HIS GREATEST WEAPON THUS FAR HAS BEEN SIMPLE EVASION, AND SOON EVEN THE SIMPLE ENERGY FOR THAT WILL FADE...
CONAN--YOUR NECKLACE! THE MONSTER SEEKS THE NECKLACE!
BY CROM, GIRL, YOU SPEAK THE TRUTH!
THE CURSED THING GLOWS!
YOU FOOL, DARWEENA!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING--?!
SHE IS TRADING HER ALLEGIANCE, SORCEROR--TO HER KING!
OVER HERE, MONSTER--HERE'S YOUR MEAL!
AND MAY YOU FIND THE MEAT SWEET!
AAIIEEE

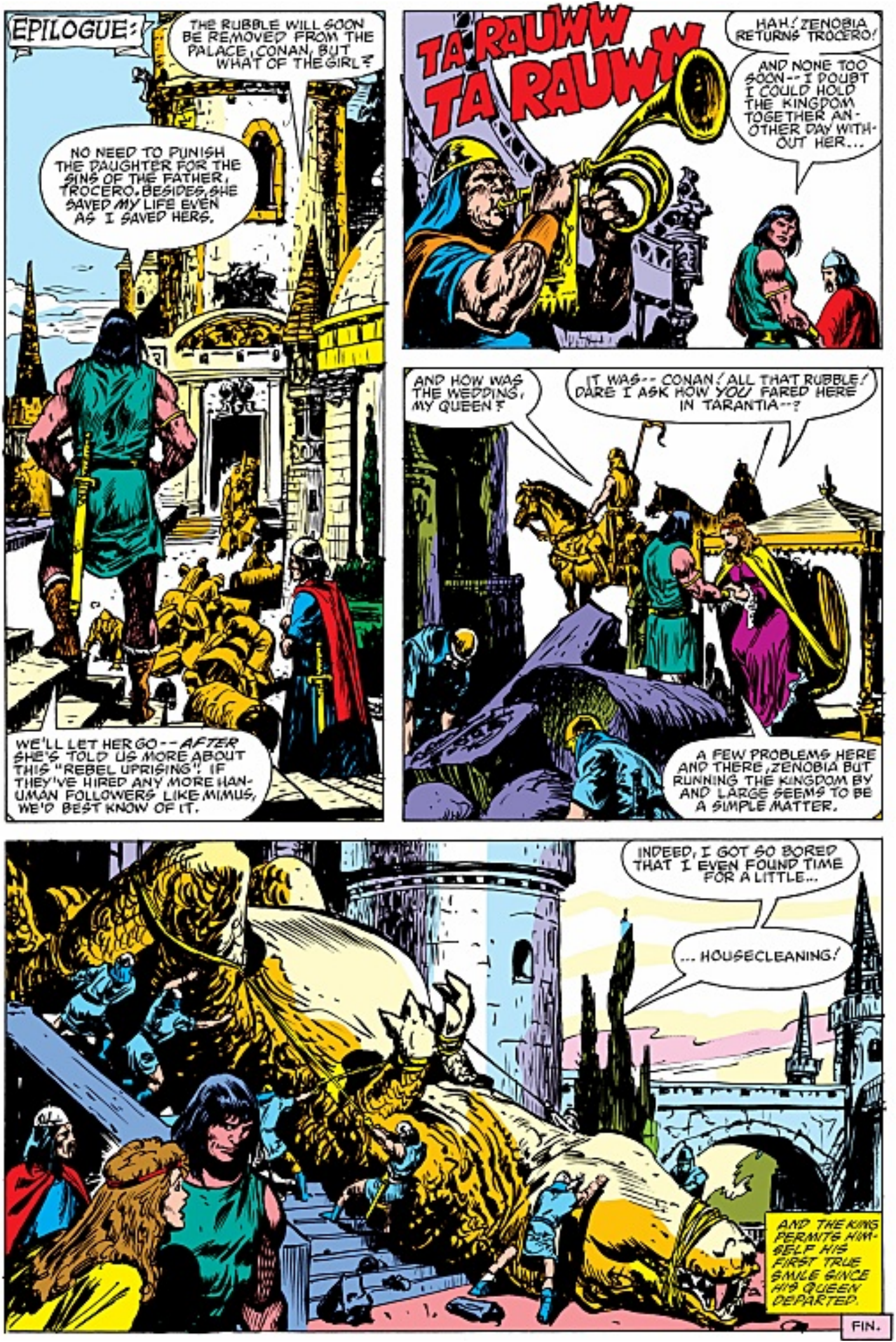

AND AS THE FATHER OF SET FEASTS...
THE TAIL AGAIN--!
OUT OF THE WAY, GIRL!
THE ENTIRE CHAMBER QUAKES FROM THE IMPACT!
FLEE THE PALACE, GIRL! MIMUS IS DEAD BUT HIS CREATION STILL LIVES, AND I DON'T KNOW HOW TO--
WAIT! THE MARBLE PILLAR!
AYE, BY CROM--THAT'S THE WAY!
DAYS EARLIER ON THE PLATEAU'S SACRIFICIAL ALTAR, HE'D URGED DARWEENA TO USE A PILLAR FOR PROTECTION...
BUT NOW, RECALLING HOW HE'D USED A PLATEAU TREE TO DISPATCH THE FIRST MIST-MONSTER, HE SEIZES THIS MARBLED PILLAR FOR MORE THAN MERE PROTECTION...
HE SEIZES IT AS A WEAPON!
ALREADY CRACKED AND WEAKENED BY THE MONSTER'S THRASHING TAIL, IT NOW GRATES AND BUCKLES UNDER CONAN'S DESPERATE STRAIN...

AND, MUCH LIKE UPROOTED TREE AND FANG--
GREEEAHR
--IT SLAYS A MONSTER.
AND, AYE IT IS ONE PILLAR THAT WILL CAST NO FURTHER SHADOW ON CONAN'S THRONE...

THAT'S TWICE.
THIS TIME, BEAST, IF YOU HAVE ANY SENSE... YOU'LL STAY DEAD.

DAWN, CONAN--A CLEAR DAWN WITH NO MIST...!
SO IT IS, GIRL--DAWN OF THE DAY MY QUEEN RETURNS.

AND OUTSIDE, A MIRACLE COMES TO TARANTIA...
PRAISE MITRA! THE MIST IS GONE-- AND THE PALACE HAS RETURNED!


EPILOGUE:
THE RUBBLE WILL SOON BE REMOVED FROM THE PALACE, CONAN, BUT WHAT OF THE GIRL?
NO NEED TO PUNISH THE DAUGHTER FOR THE SINS OF THE FATHER, TROCERO. BESIDES, SHE SAVED MY LIFE EVEN AS I SAVED HERS.
WE'LL LET HER GO -- AFTER SHE'S TOLD US MORE ABOUT THIS "REBEL UPRISING"! IF THEY'VE HIRED ANY MORE HANUMAN FOLLOWERS LIKE MIMUS, WE'D BEST KNOW OF IT.
TA RAUWW TA RAUWW
HAH! ZENOBIA RETURNS TROCERO!
AND NONE TOO SOON -- I DOUBT I COULD HOLD THE KINGDOM TOGETHER ANOTHER DAY WITHOUT HER...
AND HOW WAS THE WEDDING, MY QUEEN?
IT WAS -- CONAN! ALL THAT RUBBLE! DARE I ASK HOW YOU FARED HERE IN TARANTIA --?
A FEW PROBLEMS HERE AND THERE, ZENOBIA BUT RUNNING THE KINGDOM BY AND LARGE SEEMS TO BE A SIMPLE MATTER.
INDEED, I GOT SO BORED THAT I EVEN FOUND TIME FOR A LITTLE...
... HOUSECLEANING!
AND THE KING PERMITS HIMSELF HIS FIRST TRUE SMILE SINCE HIS QUEEN DEPARTED.
FIN.

KING CONAN

c/o MARVEL COMICS GROUP
575 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022

LOUISE JONES
EDITOR
DANNY FINGEROTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Louise,

KING CONAN #8 was great. The cover, story and art were all superb, as usual, and the art team of John Buscema and Ernie Chan are the best Marvel has. I hope the book goes monthly, because I can't stand the suspence of waiting three months for each issue. By the way, I really enjoy the Hyborian Page and the pin-ups, particularly those by Keith Pollard, Ernie Chan, and Gil Kane.

Jeff Stewart
56 Woodbridge Rd.
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8K 3C9

Thanks for the raves, Jeff. We'd love to make KING CONAN a monthly book — except then we'd have to take responsibility for the nervous breakdowns of everyone involved. But Wouldja settle for *bi-monthly?* 'Cause that's what it is as of this issue!

Dear Louise,

"A Queen Reclaimed!" (KING CONAN #8) was great. The artwork by John Buscema/Ernie Chan was wonderful, as usual. I like the way the story made use of lesser-known aspects of Conan's past. I hope that when Queen Zenobia pops up in future issues, it won't be as a pawn of Conan's foes. Good luck for the future.

Charles David Haskell
15 W. 139th St.
New York, NY 10037

Dear Louise,

I picked up a KING CONAN comic for the first time, and I've fallen into the Conan craze. The art of #8 was so gorgeous,it almost choked the breath from me. John Buscema and Ernie Chan are exceptionally fabulous artists. On other subjects, I see in your letters section that there is a push on for KING CONAN to go monthly. I like the idea as much as the next person, but please don't sacrifice a good team just to step up the frequency. The art team is the backbone of KING CONAN's success. So please don't do it.

Trevor Ayoon
595 The East Mall
Ishington, Ont., Can. M9B 6E9

Wow! That's the first time we ever had a reader beg us to *not* make KING CONAN monthly. But we can't assail your logic, Trevor. We'll never publish KING CONAN so frequently that its quality suffers. Promise.

Dear Marvel,

This is the first time I've written to a Marvel comic, and it's really the first time I've ever felt something was great enough to write about. KING CONAN is superbly written and drawn. John Buscema and Ernie Chan are a great team, so please don't change them. Let other artists handle CONAN or SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN, but leave them out of this magazine.

I really hope you come out with SON OF CONAN soon. If you do, I think you should make it a black and white magazine, like SAVAGE SWORD.

Toby Chipman
3914 Nora Cl.
Salt Lake City, UT 84117

SON OF CONAN?! It's hard enough putting out an average of 100 pages per month of Conan now, Toby. Prince Conn'll just have to wait his turn. Of course, if we were deluged with letters demanding SON OF CONAN, well... who knows?

Dear Louise,

In KING CONAN #8, you had him cross the Great Wall of Khitai... which is to say, the Great Wall of China, centuries before the modern (more or less) wall was built. Two great walls in China is stretching coincidence past the breaking point unless you can show some connection between them, such as the Emperor who ordered the (re-)building of the wall being aware that a wall existed in Conan's time.

Michael Tirestein
Emory Towers
Orangeburg, SC 29115

And who's to say he wasn't, Mike? Not us, certainly not since you've just provided us with a perfect way out of the puzzle you pose. On the other hand, we won't say he was, since KING CONAN is hardly the place to discuss historical matters from millennia later than Conan's time. In other words, you've just witnessed a mighty Marvel sidestep — and you'll have to draw your own conclusions about the Great Wall(s). Thanks for writing. (Helpful, aren't we?)

Dear Louise,

I'm looking forward to the future of KING CONAN, with one of my favorite writers — Doug Moench — taking over the book. Please keep the quality alive. I can live with a quarterly book, as long as the quality is there.

Mike Sopp
438 W. 32 St.
Erie, PA 16508

We'll try, Mike. Let us know what you think.

COVER PENCILER & INKER: BILL SIENKIEWICZ

Stan Lee PRESENTS:
KING CONAN
Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD
THE HAUNTER OF THE CENOTAPH
IN NEMEDIA, EAST OF KING CONAN'S AQUILONIA, THERE LIES A SHADOW-MANTLED LANE CLOSELY FLANKED BY ALTERNATING TREES AND STATUES, EACH MIGHTY OF STATURE AND BROODING OF MIEN.
THOUGH WHISPERED TALES OF THE PLACE ARE RIFE, SELDOM IS ITS DREAD LENGTH VENTURED. TONIGHT, HOWEVER, LOW MOON AND LURID TORCH UNITE TO CONQUER THE CANOPY OF DARKNESS...
CAREFUL--THESE CURSED CASKS ARE SLIPPERY.
AND WELL THEY SHOULD BE--STILL SLIMED AS THE ARE WITH THE MUD OF THE GRAVE.
... AND THE CRUEL, UNSEEING EYES OF ANCIENT WARRIORS BEAR MUTE WITNESS TO A MYSTERIOUS PROCESSION.
DOUG MOENCH / ALAN KUPPERBERG WRITER
ERNIE CHAN / ARTISTS · EMBELLISHER
R. PARKER & J. CHIANG, letters / G. ROUSSOS COLORS
LOUISE JONES / EDITOR
JIM SHOOTER / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

STRUGGLING, CURSING, AND SWEATING DESPITE THE NIGHT, THE BEARERS HURRY BETWEEN THE STATUES, EACH A MONUMENT TO A DIFFERENT TIME AND PLACE OF VAST SLAYINGS.
AND JUST WHEN IT SEEMS THAT THE COLD EYES, ARRAYED IN BLINDNESS ARE THE SOLE OBSERVERS...
FIFTY LIVES DARKENED.
THE TOLL OF THE DEATH-SHAPER.
THE PROCESSION HALTS.
DUMP THEM IN THE PIT.
THE HEAD BEARER NODS, A TRIFLE NERVOUSLY...
... AND HASTENS HIS FELLOWS TO OBEY CAREFUL TO GIVE THE LEASHED PANTHERS WIDE BERTH.
SOON, MY PETS...
... SOON THE LONG WAITING SHALL COME TO AN END.
OUHRR
PENTAGARZEX

TARANTIA, CAPITAL OF AQUILONIA, AND A CITY DOMINATED BY THE PALACE OF ITS KING...
NO NEED TO BE NERVOUS, GIRL...

KING CONAN AND QUEEN ZENOBIA SIMPLY WISH TO QUESTION YOU ABOUT THE REBEL PLOT TO SEIZE THE THRONE. JUST SPEAK WHAT YOU KNOW AND SPEAK IT TRUTHFULLY.
I... I SHALL DO MY BEST, COUNT TROCERO.

AND, IN THE THRONEROOM...
ENOUGH KNEELING, DARWEENA, AFTER ALL, WE HAVE SAVED EACH OTHER'S LIVES, GIRL.
SO WE HAVE, MY KING.
AYE-- NOW TELL ME ABOUT THIS PLOT.

WELL... YOURS IS THE MOST COVETED KINGDOM IN THE WORLD MY KING, THE SEAT OF GREATEST POWER AND MOST ADVANCED CULTURE, THE WEALTHYEST AND MOST STRATEGICALLY--
YES, YES-- AND YET I HAVE ENEMIES SKULKING EVERYWHERE, IT SEEMS. GET ON WITH IT, GIRL!

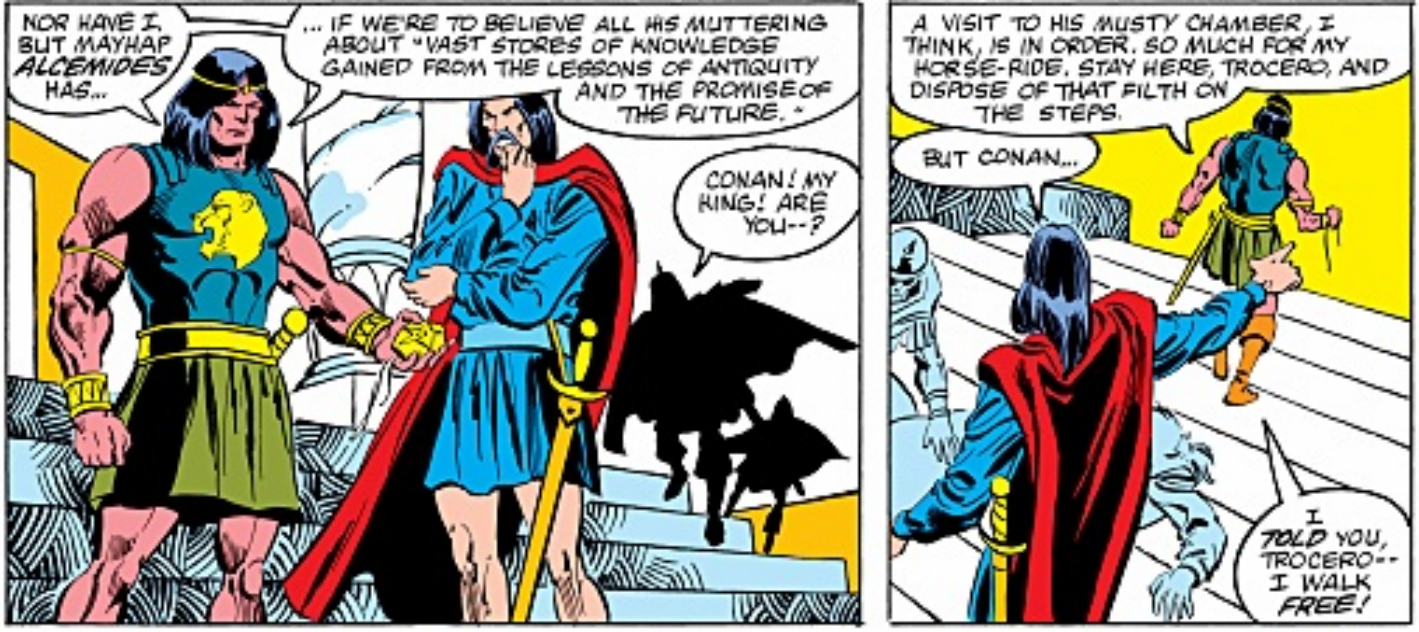
YOU HAVE ENEMIES NOT IN SPITE OF YOUR POSITION, MY KING, BUT BECAUSE OF IT.
OBVIOUSLY, DARWEENA.
THERE ARE ALWAYS THOSE WHO LUST FOR THE ULTIMATE PRIZE. BUT WHO ARE THEY? WHERE ARE THEY? WHAT ARE THEIR PLANS OF ACTION?

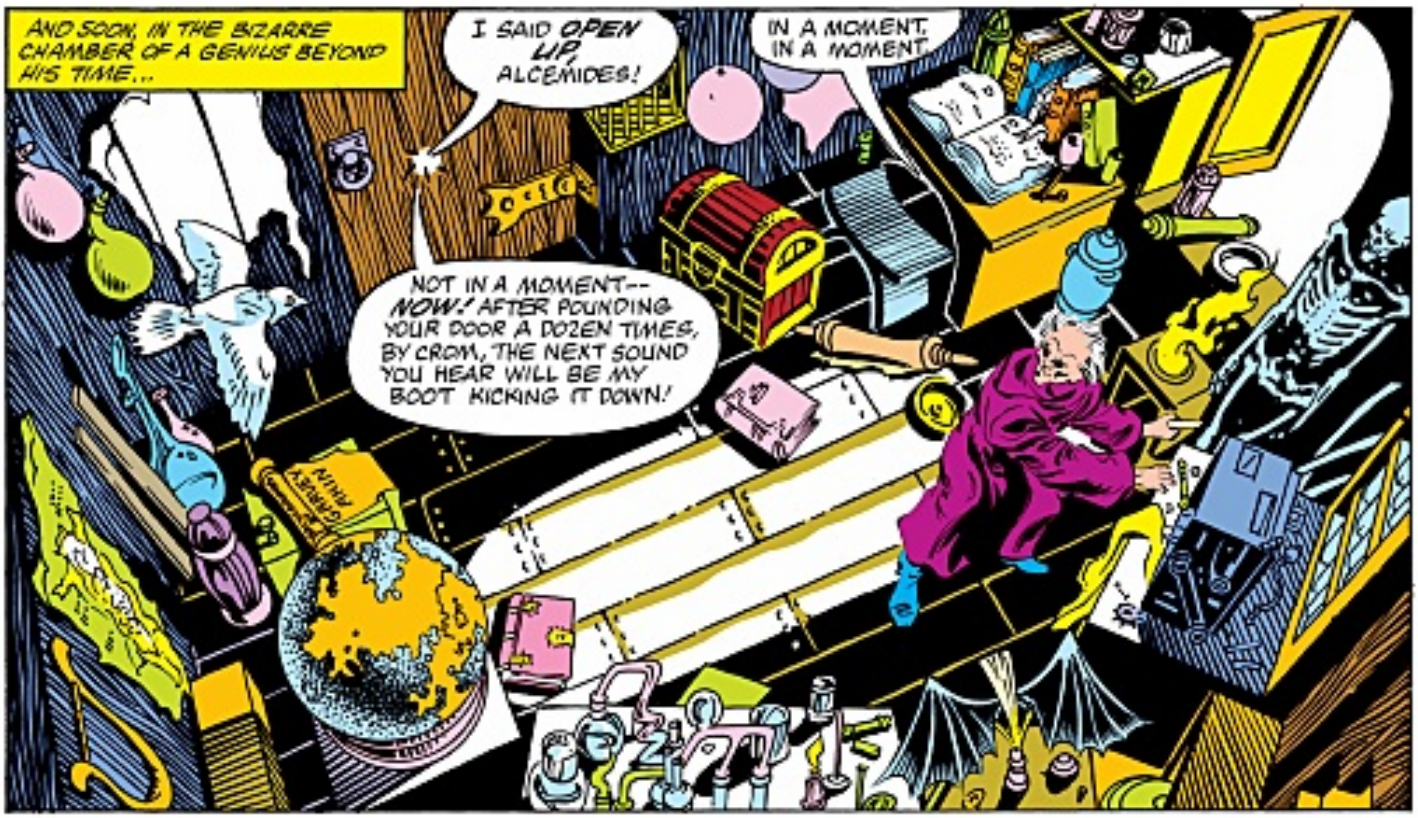
I CAN GIVE YOU BUT SEVERAL NAMES OF THE LESSER CONSPIRATORS HERE IN TARANTIA, MY QUEEN, THOUGH THEY HAVE DOUBTLESS FLED THE CITY, AND MAYHAP THE NATION, NOW THAT MY FATHER MIMIR'S PLOT HAS FAILED.
NEVERTHELESS, YOUR IRON LEGIONS MAY BE ABLE TO TRACK THEM DOWN... BUT...

"BUT"--?
THESE LESSER CONSPIRATORS, FOR THE PROMISE OF EITHER PETTY OR EXTRAVAGANT REWARDS, ALL SERVE SOME GREATER POWER...
...OR MAYHAP SEVERAL SUCH GREATER POWERS--SOMEONE OR SOME GROUP CAPABLE OF STRIKING FEAR EVEN INTO THE HEART OF A SORCEROR AS POWERFUL AS MY FATHER.

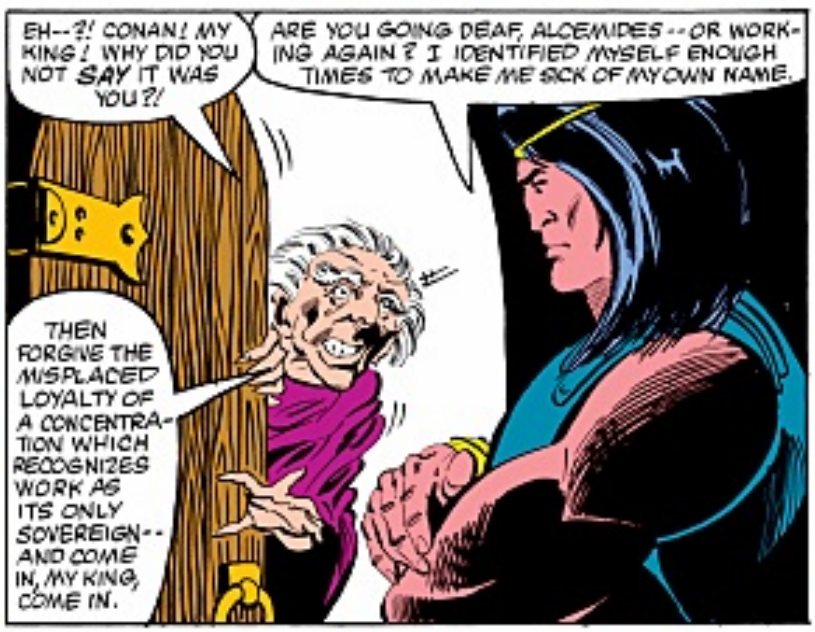
AND THIS GREATER POWER OR POWERS--? DO YOU KNOW WHO--
NO, COUNT TROCERO--THE KNOWLEDGE! WOULD SURELY HAVE STRUCK ME DEAD LONG ERE NOW.
THEN ALL YOU CAN TELL ME, DARNEENA, IS THAT UNKNOWN JACKALS WAIT BEYOND THE CAMPFIRE...
...ONE OR MORE OF WHICH OCCASIONALLY SUMMON THE COURAGE TO MAKE A MOVE ON ME.
I AM AFRAID THAT IS THE CASE, MY KING.
I KNOW THAT YOU ARE IN GRAVE DANGER... BUT I KNOW NOT WHEN OR HOW OR IN WHAT FORM THE DANGER WILL STRIKE NEXT.
VERY WELL. ATTENDANTS -- GET THE NAMES OF THE LESSER AQUILONIAN CONSPIRATORS FROM HER -- THEN LET HER GO. AND IF THE REBELS ARE STILL TO BE FOUND IN THE CITY, HAVE THEM ARRESTED.
AT ONCE, QUEEN ZENOBIA.
I NEED SOME AIR, ZENOBIA -- A HARD RIDE ON A GOOD HORSE.
COME, TROCERO -- WE'LL TALK ON THE WIND.
WE'VE NOT LEARNED MUCH, HAVE WE?
EVERYTHING THE GIRL KNEW, I'M SURE, CONAN.
AYE, SHE CAN BE TRUSTED, TROCERO. AND AT LEAST WE NOW KNOW THE REBEL MOVEMENT TO BE MORE WIDESPREAD THAN --
DEATH TO ALL TYRANTS! DEATH TO THE KING!
CONAN--!

AGH-K-K
I SAW HIM TRO-CERO...
...LURKING LIKE A DOG BEHIND THE PILLAR!
I SIMPLY THOUGHT IT BETTER TO LET HIM MAKE HIS MOVE--
--THAN TO SCARE HIM OFF AND WONDER WHEN NEXT HE'D STRIKE!
BUT, CROM! WHAT HAS IT COME TO, TROCERO? BLOOD ON THE VERY PALACE STEPS?
HENCEFORTH, CONAN, I... I THINK YOU SHOULD BE SURROUNDED BY ARMED GUARDS AT ALL TIMES!
AND WORRY OVER WHICH ONE OF THE GUARDS HOLDS A DIRK LIKE HIS? NO, TROCERO, AS LONG AS THE BLOOD ON THE STEPS IS NOT MINE, I SHALL WALK A FREE MAN, SHACKLED NOT EVEN BY THE MOST COVETED THRONE IN THE WORLD..
EH--? WHAT'S THAT ABOUT HIS NECK?
SOME SORT OF MEDALLION...
HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ITS LIKE BEFORE, TROCERO?
NO...NOT WITH THE OUTER PENTAGRAM INVERTED, CONAN...


NOR HAVE I, BUT MAYHAP ALCEMIDES HAS...
... IF WE'RE TO BELIEVE ALL HIS MUTTERING ABOUT "VAST STORES OF KNOWLEDGE GAINED FROM THE LESSONS OF ANTIQUITY AND THE PROMISE OF THE FUTURE."
CONAN! MY KING! ARE YOU--?
A VISIT TO HIS MUSTY CHAMBER, I THINK, IS IN ORDER. SO MUCH FOR MY HORSE-RIDE. STAY HERE, TROCERO, AND DISPOSE OF THAT FILTH ON THE STEPS.
BUT CONAN...
I TOLD YOU, TROCERO-- I WALK FREE!


AND SOON, IN THE BIZARRE CHAMBER OF A GENIUS BEYOND HIS TIME...
I SAID OPEN UP, ALCEMIDES!
IN A MOMENT, IN A MOMENT.
NOT IN A MOMENT-- NOW! AFTER POUNDING YOUR DOOR A DOZEN TIMES, BY CROM, THE NEXT SOUND YOU HEAR WILL BE MY BOOT KICKING IT DOWN!

OH, ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT--HAVE IT YOUR WAY! THE BRUTE FORCE OF BARBARISM, MITRA KNOWS, HAS MORE THAN ONCE IN THE PAST SHATTERED THE PAINSTAKING TOILS OF SCIENCE!


EH--?! CONAN! MY KING! WHY DID YOU NOT SAY IT WAS YOU?!
ARE YOU GOING DEAF, ALCEMIDES--OR WORKING AGAIN? I IDENTIFIED MYSELF ENOUGH TIMES TO MAKE ME SICK OF MY OWN NAME.
THEN FORGIVE THE MISPLACED LOYALTY OF A CONCENTRATION WHICH RECOGNIZES WORK AS ITS ONLY SOVEREIGN--AND COME IN, MY KING, COME IN.

A VISIT BY THE KING IS EVER WELCOME--YOUR LAUGHTER IS AT LEAST SOFT, YOU KNOW.
OH? AND SHOULD I LAUGH AT THIS, ALCEMIDES?
WHAT IS IT?
THIS, MY KING IS EVERYTHING. IT IS THE WORLD.
THE WORLD--?
AYE--IF IT IS INDEED ROUND, AS I CONTEND, THEN THIS IS ROUGHLY HOW IT SHOULD LOOK FROM THE DISTANT SKY...
...IF ONE COULD EVER GAIN SUCH A CELESTIAL VANTAGE POINT, THAT IS.
AND WILL MAN EVER STAND WITH THE GODS, ALCEMIDES?
YES! SOMEDAY! IT IS OUR DESTINY!
OF COURSE, THERE MAY BE FAILURES ALONG THE WAY...
...FAILURES MARKED BY NEAR DESTRUCTION OF THE ENTIRE RACE OF MAN, SUCH AS OCCURRED AT LEAST SEVERAL TIMES IN THE DIM PAST. INDEED, WE ARE JUST NOW RECOVERING FROM ONE SUCH FAILURE...
YOU MEAN...
I MEAN, MY KING, THAT WE MIGHT STAND WITH THE GODS EVEN NOW--HAD SOME WRETCHED FOOL NOT CHOSEN THE WRONG PATH! BUT THE BUT THE CHANCE WILL COME ROUND AGAIN, YES...
...AND SOONER OR LATER ONE KEY MAN, OR MAYHAP EVEN WOMAN, WILL CHOOSE THE CORRECT PATH.
YOU SEE, IF MY THEORIES ARE RIGHT, THE WORLD WAS ONCE FILLED WITH MANY MARVELS OF MAN'S INVENTION--GLORIOUS KNOWLEDGE SURPASSING EVEN MY BRIGHTLY MAD DREAMS...
...AND THE WORLD SHALL BE SO FILLED AGAIN IN THE FUTURE. I CALL IT: SHIFTING CYCLES.
CONAN IS AMUSED BY THIS JAPE OF THE MAN, BUT IN A FOND, RATHER THAN MOCKING FASHION...
...AND SO IS GENUINELY TOUCHED, AS THE PHILOSPHER SLUMPS IN DEJECTION...
YES... A CYCLE OF PAST AND FUTURE GLORY... AND IN THE MEANTIME I AM LEFT TO LABOR IN THE DARK SHAMBLES IN BETWEEN... CURSED BY THE CRUEL TIMING OF MY BIRTH...
BUT... YOU CAME HERE FOR A REASON, MY KING?
AYE, ALCEMIDES...

THIS CURIOUS MEDALLION...
MOLOCH'S HELL, CONAN! WHERE DID YOU GET SUCH A THING?
FROM THE COLLAR OF A DOG WHO WISHED TO SNIFF MY BLOOD! WHY?
'TIS THE SEAL-- THE HELLISH MARK-- OF AN ANCIENT DEMON ON EARTH!
DEMON?
AYE -- A MADMAN -- A DESTROYER OF KNOWLEDGE! HIS NAME WAS PENTAGAR ZEX, AND HE MAY WELL HAVE BEEN ONE OF THOSE I CURSED-- A CHOOSER OF THE WRONG PATH, A BETRAYER OF MAN'S DESTINY AMONG THE GODS!
HE WAS SAID TO DWELL NOT FAR FROM HERE, THOUGH IN AGES PAST...
... AND THERE ARE THOSE, EVEN NOW, WHO FORM IN SECRET, BLASPHEMOUS CULTS TO WORSHIP HIS FOUL NAME.
NOT FAR FROM HERE, ALCEMIDES? WHERE?
BEYOND THE EASTERN MOUNTAINS, IN WESTERN NEMEDIA -- A SMALL, ALMOST FORGOTTEN CITY NAMED THALIA.
THALIA... AND YOU HAVE MAPS TO THIS PLACE?
AYE -- I WILL GIVE YOU MAPS, MY KING, BUT I WARN YOU...
...THEY MAY SHOW YOU THE WAY STRAIGHT TO HADES.

THAT NIGHT AT THE PALACE SUPPER, NEVERTHELESS, CONAN ANNOUNCES HIS DECISION...
I GO TO THALIA IN NEMEDIA...TOMORROW... ALONE.
BUT MY KING -- ALONE? AFTER WHAT HAPPENED EARLIER TODAY?

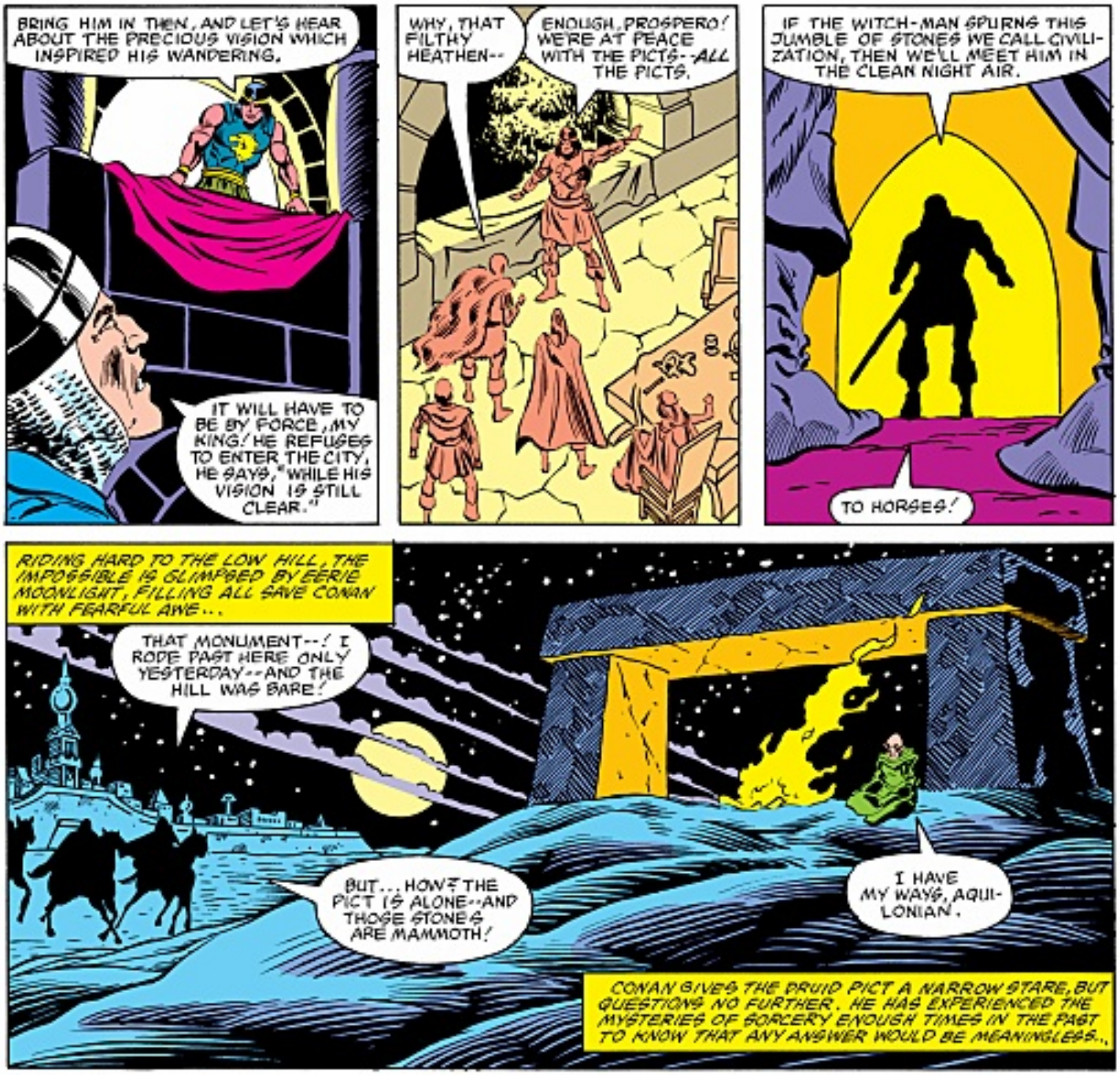
AYE, TROCERO, ALONE. WHETHER MY DESTINY IS TO STAND SHOULDER TO SHOULDER WITH THE GODS OR ROT IN MOLOCH'S HELL WITH DEMONS AS MY ONLY COMPANIONS...
...I MEAN TO SEEK THAT DESTINY FACE TO FACE -- AND ALONE.

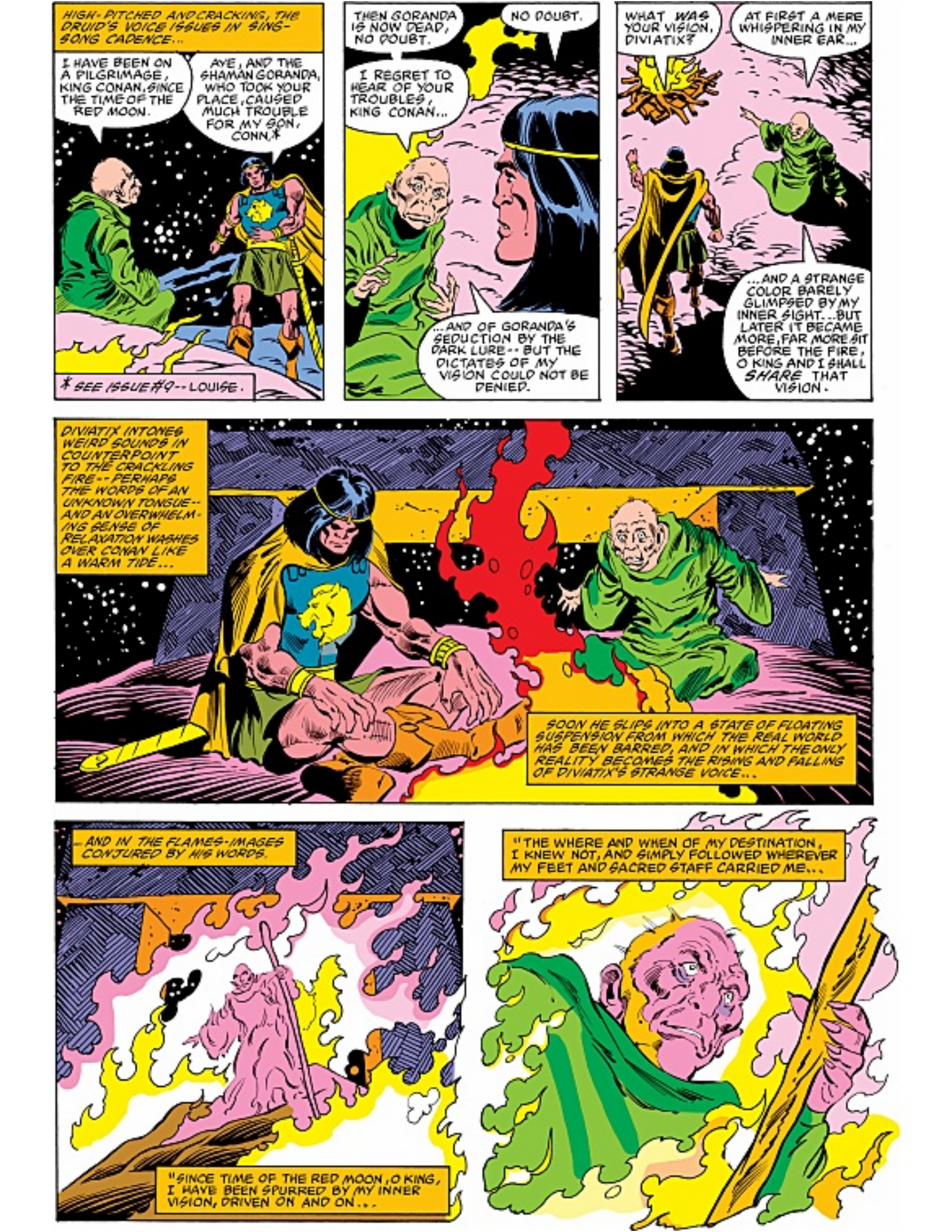
'TIS HARDLY A MATTER OF SEEKING YOUR DESTINY, CONAN... NOR IS IT A MATTER OF COURAGE OR COWARDICE! 'TIS A PRACTICAL MATTER... SURELY YOU SEE THAT? THE KINGDOM DEPENDS ON YOU...

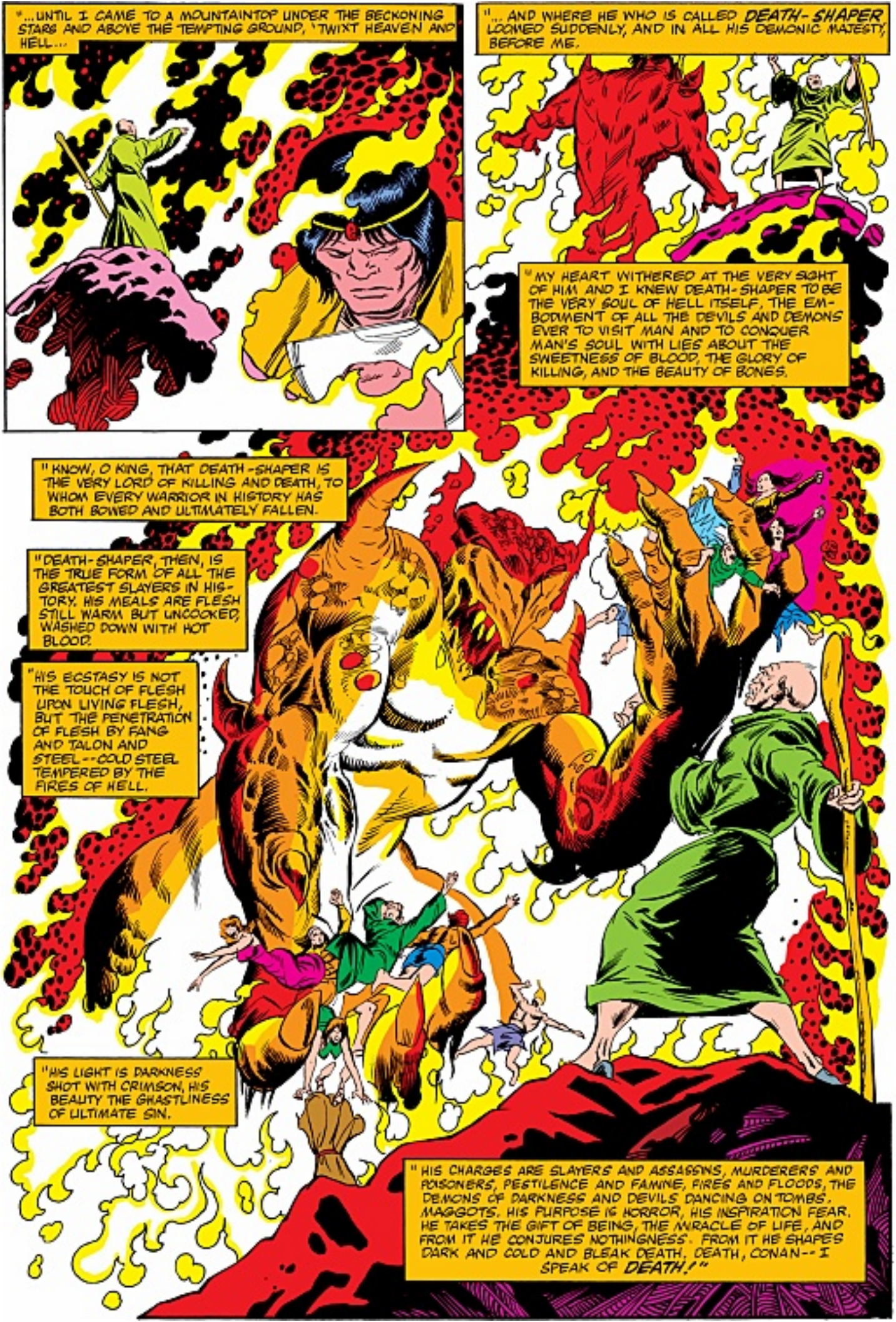
BUT I SPEAK IN PRACTICAL TERMS AS WELL. HOW DO YOU THINK I TOOK THE CROWN?
AGAINST ALL ODDS AND PRACTICAL ADVICE! NOT BY SKULKING OR HIDING, AS YOU WELL KNOW! AND I'LL NOT HIDE NOW!

ONLY BY RISKING ALL, PROSPERO, IS THE REWARD WORTH THE RISK.
AYE, MY KING, BUT--
HOLD! A RIDER COMES--BEARING HARD ON HIS MOUNT!

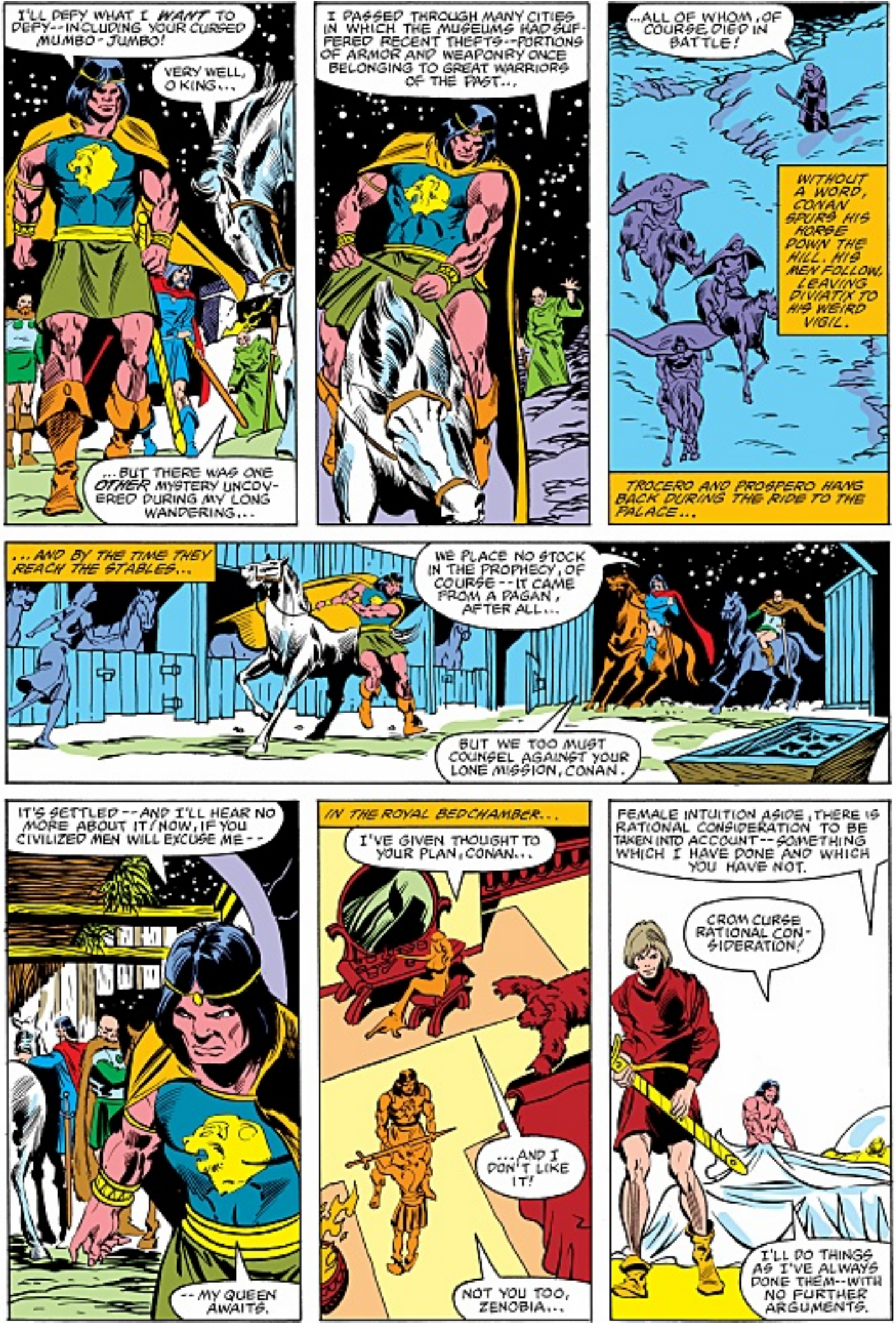
HO, RIDER! YOU BRING NEWS?
AYE, MY KING--THE DRUID PICT DIVIATIX HAS RETURNED!
HE CAMPS ON THE HILL BEYOND THE CITY'S GATES!


BRING HIM IN THEN, AND LET'S HEAR ABOUT THE PRECIOUS VISION WHICH INSPIRED HIS WANDERING.
IT WILL HAVE TO BE BY FORCE, MY KING! HE REFUSES TO ENTER THE CITY, HE SAYS, "WHILE HIS VISION IS STILL CLEAR."
WHY, THAT FILTHY HEATHEN--
ENOUGH, PROSPERO! WE'RE AT PEACE WITH THE PICTS--ALL THE PICTS.
IF THE WITCH-MAN SPURNS THIS JUMBLE OF STONES WE CALL CIVILIZATION, THEN WE'LL MEET HIM IN THE CLEAN NIGHT AIR.
TO HORSES!
RIDING HARD TO THE LOW HILL, THE IMPOSSIBLE IS GLIMPSED BY EERIE MOONLIGHT, FILLING ALL SAVE CONAN WITH FEARFUL AWE...
THAT MONUMENT--! I RODE PAST HERE ONLY YESTERDAY--AND THE HILL WAS BARE!
BUT... HOW? THE PICT IS ALONE--AND THOSE STONES ARE MAMMOTH!
I HAVE MY WAYS, AQUILONIAN.
CONAN GIVES THE DRUID PICT A NARROW STARE, BUT QUESTIONS NO FURTHER. HE HAS EXPERIENCED THE MYSTERIES OF SORCERY ENOUGH TIMES IN THE PAST TO KNOW THAT ANY ANSWER WOULD BE MEANINGLESS...
...ALTHOUGH PROSPERO, FOR ONE, REMAINS INCENSED.
A PAGAN MONUMENT ON AQUILONIAN SOIL! MITRA IS BLASPHEMED--!
MITRA IS ENOUGH OF A GOD TO COUNTENANCE OTHERS OF HIS ILK, PROSPERO. I MYSELF SWEAR BY CROM AS OFTEN AS BY MITRA!
BUT THAT IS DIFFERENT, MY KING! YOU'RE FROM CIMMERIA--
--AND THE PICT IS FROM BEYOND THE BLACK RIVER.
ENOUGH! 'TIS TIME FOR DIVIATIX TO SPEAK...


HIGH-PITCHED AND CRACKING, THE DRUID'S VOICE ISSUES IN SING-SONG CADENCE...
I HAVE BEEN ON A PILGRIMAGE, KING CONAN, SINCE THE TIME OF THE RED MOON.
AYE, AND THE SHAMAN GORANDA, WHO TOOK YOUR PLACE, CAUSED MUCH TROUBLE FOR MY SON, CONN.*
* SEE ISSUE #9 -- LOUISE.
THEN GORANDA IS NOW DEAD, NO DOUBT.
NO DOUBT.
I REGRET TO HEAR OF YOUR TROUBLES, KING CONAN...
...AND OF GORANDA'S SEDUCTION BY THE DARK LURE -- BUT THE DICTATES OF MY VISION COULD NOT BE DENIED.
WHAT WAS YOUR VISION, DIVIATIX?
AT FIRST A MERE WHISPERING IN MY INNER EAR...
...AND A STRANGE COLOR BARELY GLIMPSED BY MY INNER SIGHT...BUT LATER IT BECAME MORE, FAR MORE! SIT BEFORE THE FIRE, O KING AND I SHALL SHARE THAT VISION.
DIVIATIX INTONES WEIRD SOUNDS IN COUNTERPOINT TO THE CRACKLING FIRE -- PERHAPS THE WORDS OF AN UNKNOWN TONGUE -- AND AN OVERWHELMING SENSE OF RELAXATION WASHES OVER CONAN LIKE A WARM TIDE...
SOON HE SLIPS INTO A STATE OF FLOATING SUSPENSION FROM WHICH THE REAL WORLD HAS BEEN BARRED, AND IN WHICH THE ONLY REALITY BECOMES THE RISING AND FALLING OF DIVIATIX'S STRANGE VOICE...
...AND IN THE FLAMES-IMAGES CONJURED BY HIS WORDS.
"SINCE TIME OF THE RED MOON, O KING, I HAVE BEEN SPURRED BY MY INNER VISION, DRIVEN ON AND ON...
"THE WHERE AND WHEN OF MY DESTINATION, I KNEW NOT, AND SIMPLY FOLLOWED WHEREVER MY FEET AND SACRED STAFF CARRIED ME...


"...UNTIL I CAME TO A MOUNTAINTOP UNDER THE BECKONING STARS AND ABOVE THE TEMPTING GROUND, 'TWIXT HEAVEN AND HELL...
"...AND WHERE HE WHO IS CALLED DEATH-SHAPER LOOMED SUDDENLY, AND IN ALL HIS DEMONIC MAJESTY, BEFORE ME.
"MY HEART WITHERED AT THE VERY SIGHT OF HIM AND I KNEW DEATH-SHAPER TO BE THE VERY SOUL OF HELL ITSELF, THE EMBODIMENT OF ALL THE DEVILS AND DEMONS EVER TO VISIT MAN AND TO CONQUER MAN'S SOUL WITH LIES ABOUT THE SWEETNESS OF BLOOD, THE GLORY OF KILLING, AND THE BEAUTY OF BONES.
"KNOW, O KING, THAT DEATH-SHAPER IS THE VERY LORD OF KILLING AND DEATH, TO WHOM EVERY WARRIOR IN HISTORY HAS BOTH BOWED AND ULTIMATELY FALLEN.
"DEATH-SHAPER, THEN, IS THE TRUE FORM OF ALL THE GREATEST SLAYERS IN HISTORY. HIS MEALS ARE FLESH STILL WARM BUT UNCOOKED, WASHED DOWN WITH HOT BLOOD.
"HIS ECSTASY IS NOT THE TOUCH OF FLESH UPON LIVING FLESH, BUT THE PENETRATION OF FLESH BY FANG AND TALON AND STEEL--COLD STEEL TEMPERED BY THE FIRES OF HELL.
"HIS LIGHT IS DARKNESS SHOT WITH CRIMSON, HIS BEAUTY THE GHASTLINESS OF ULTIMATE SIN.
"HIS CHARGES ARE SLAYERS AND ASSASSINS, MURDERERS AND POISONERS, PESTILENCE AND FAMINE, FIRES AND FLOODS, THE DEMONS OF DARKNESS AND DEVILS DANCING ON TOMBS. MAGGOTS. HIS PURPOSE IS HORROR, HIS INSPIRATION FEAR. HE TAKES THE GIFT OF BEING, THE MIRACLE OF LIFE, AND FROM IT HE CONJURES NOTHINGNESS. FROM IT HE SHAPES DARK AND COLD AND BLEAK DEATH. DEATH, CONAN--I SPEAK OF DEATH!"

AND HE IS COMING, O KING! DEATH-SHAPER COMES FOR YOU!
BEWARE, O KING, WHEN YOU MEET HIM IN THE FLESH... FOR A MERE VISION OF HIS LOATHSOME MAJESTY NEARLY DROVE ME MAD!
ENOUGH, PICT! YOUR VISION IS CLEAR ENOUGH!
AND WITH SUPREME EFFORT, CONAN WRENCHES HIS EYES FROM THE FLAME.
THE WORLD SEEMS TO FALL AWAY, SPINNING INTO AN ABYSS FAR BELOW HIS FEET AS HE RISES -- BUT SHOWS NONE OF THE EFFECTS, STRIDING STEADILY AWAY...
AYE, CONAN -- TOO CLEAR...
...AND IT INSPIRED A PROPHECY WHICH I SHALL NOW MAKE...
A GREAT ONE SHALL SUCCUMB TO DEATH-SHAPER'S WAYS. THERE SHALL BE A RETURN TO THE PAST, AND A BETRAYAL OF LOVE. MASKS SHALL BE LIFTED, AND FACES FOUND STRANGE...
...AND IT SHALL END WITH THE GREATEST DEATH OF ALL -- THE DEATH OF HE WHO COULD RULE THE WORLD!
HEATHEN FILTH! HE MEANS YOUR DEATH, CONAN. HOW DARE HE --
HOLD, TROCERO...
A PROPHECY CAN UNDO ONLY THE MAN WHO PLACES STOCK IN IT. I PLACE NONE IN THE PICT'S MUMBLING.
AND YET, O KING, SOON YOU WOULD EMBARK ON A JOURNEY FRAUGHT WITH DIRE PERIL -- THE PERFECT SETTING FOR AN ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH-SHAPER.
HOW DO YOU KNOW MY PLANS?!
I KNOW. BUT CURSE ME NOT, O KING.
I HAVE COME AS A FRIEND... TO GIVE YOU FAIR WARNING OF KNOWLEDGE YOU COULD NEVER GAIN OTHERWISE. MY ADVICE -- REMAIN IN TARANTIA, SAFE WITHIN YOUR CITY'S WALLS. DEFY NOT MY PROPHECY!


I'LL DEFY WHAT I WANT TO DEFY--INCLUDING YOUR CURSED MUMBO-JUMBO!
VERY WELL, O KING...
...BUT THERE WAS ONE OTHER MYSTERY UNCOVERED DURING MY LONG WANDERING...
I PASSED THROUGH MANY CITIES IN WHICH THE MUSEUMS HAD SUFFERED RECENT THEFTS--PORTIONS OF ARMOR AND WEAPONRY ONCE BELONGING TO GREAT WARRIORS OF THE PAST...
...ALL OF WHOM, OF COURSE, DIED IN BATTLE!
WITHOUT A WORD, CONAN SPURS HIS HORSE DOWN THE HILL, HIS MEN FOLLOW, LEAVING DIVIATIX TO HIS WEIRD VIGIL.
TROCERO AND PROSPERO HANG BACK DURING THE RIDE TO THE PALACE...
...AND BY THE TIME THEY REACH THE STABLES...
WE PLACE NO STOCK IN THE PROPHECY, OF COURSE--IT CAME FROM A PAGAN, AFTER ALL...
BUT WE TOO MUST COUNSEL AGAINST YOUR LONE MISSION, CONAN.
IT'S SETTLED--AND I'LL HEAR NO MORE ABOUT IT! NOW, IF YOU CIVILIZED MEN WILL EXCUSE ME--
--MY QUEEN AWAITS.
IN THE ROYAL BEDCHAMBER...
I'VE GIVEN THOUGHT TO YOUR PLAN, CONAN...
...AND I DON'T LIKE IT!
NOT YOU TOO, ZENOBIA...
FEMALE INTUITION ASIDE, THERE IS RATIONAL CONSIDERATION TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT--SOMETHING WHICH I HAVE DONE AND WHICH YOU HAVE NOT.
CROM CURSE RATIONAL CONSIDERATION!
I'LL DO THINGS AS I'VE ALWAYS DONE THEM--WITH NO FURTHER ARGUMENTS.

NOW COME HERE WOMAN, AND--
VERY WELL, MY HUSBAND--HAVE IT YOUR WAY. NO FURTHER ARGUMENT.
GOOD NIGHT.
THAT'S WHAT I LIKE ABOUT YOU, ZENOBIA--YOU FIND WAYS OF WINNING WITHOUT WINNING. BUT IT WON'T WORK THIS TIME...
I'VE MADE UP MY MIND--AND I CAN HOLD OUT LONGER THAN YOU.

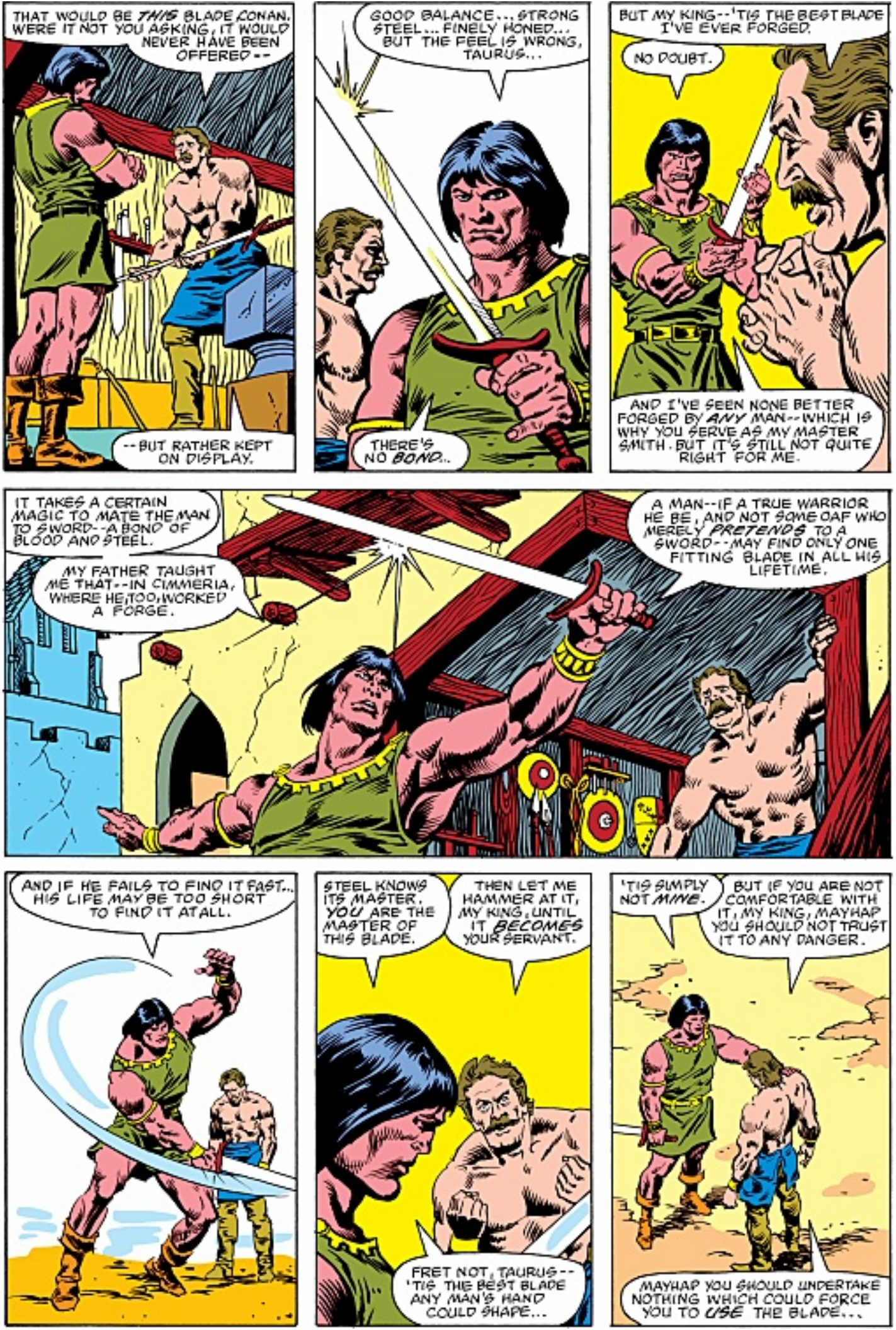
BUT BY MORNING, CONAN IS IN A FOUL MOOD...
WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE MY SWORD IS--?
WHERE'S THE SERVANT WHO TOOK IT LAST NIGHT?
I... I AM SORRY, O KING. HE...HE IS... MISSING.

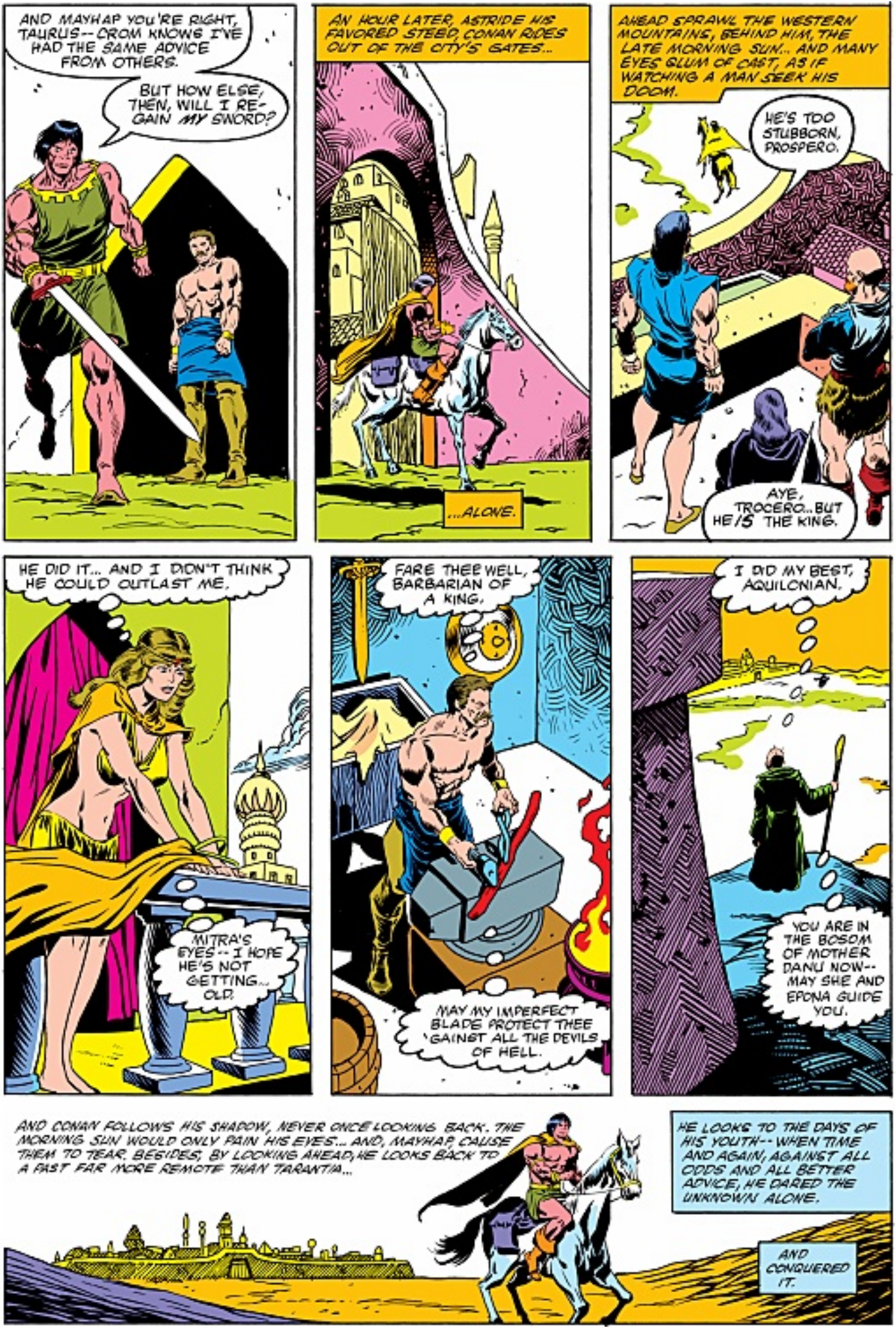
MISSING--? THEN THE SWORD WAS STOLEN--WHICH PLACES ME IN HIGH COMPANY, INDEED--IN THE RANKS OF HISTORY'S GREATEST WARRIORS... BUT BY CROM, I'M NOT READY FOR A MUSEUM YET...

WHAT WAS THE SERVANT'S NAME? WHERE WAS HE FROM--?
HE...HE WAS NAMED FALEN, O KING--
--FROM NEMEDIA... A CITY CALLED THALIA.

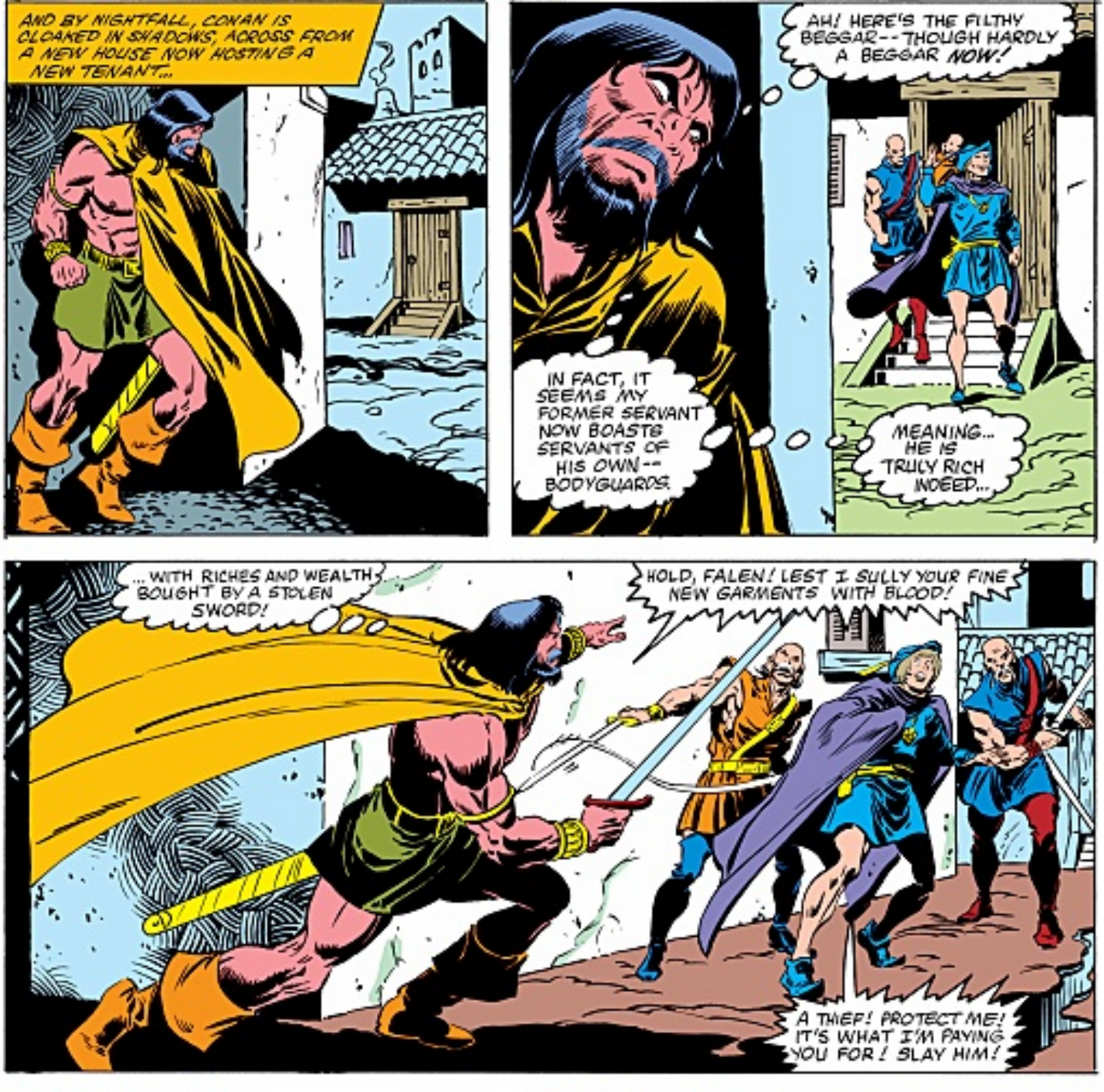
THALIA-- WHERE THE CULT OF PENTAGAR ZEX IS SAID TO SKULK! THEN ALL THE THREADS BEGIN TO WEAVE TOGETHER--AND THEY WOULD BIND ME FROM FOLLOWING THE PRIME THREAD TO ITS END...
SMALL CHANCE!
Y-YES, O KING... WHATEVER YOU S-SAY.

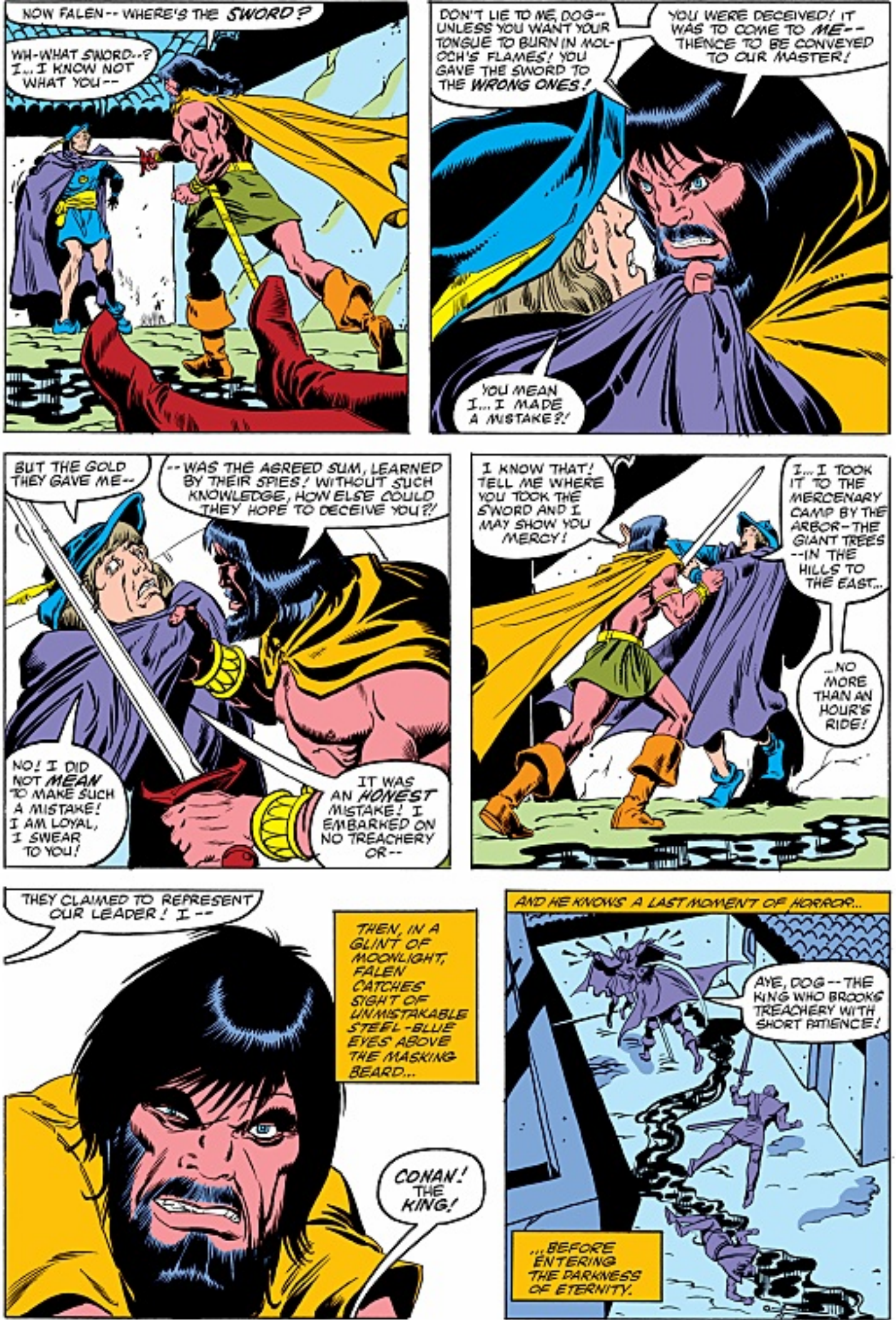
SOON IN A BUSTLING QUARTER OF THE CITY...
A GOOD MORN TO YE, MY KING! MAY I BE OF SERVICE?
THE K-KING!
AYE, TAURUS--I WANT THE BEST BLADE YOU'VE GOT.

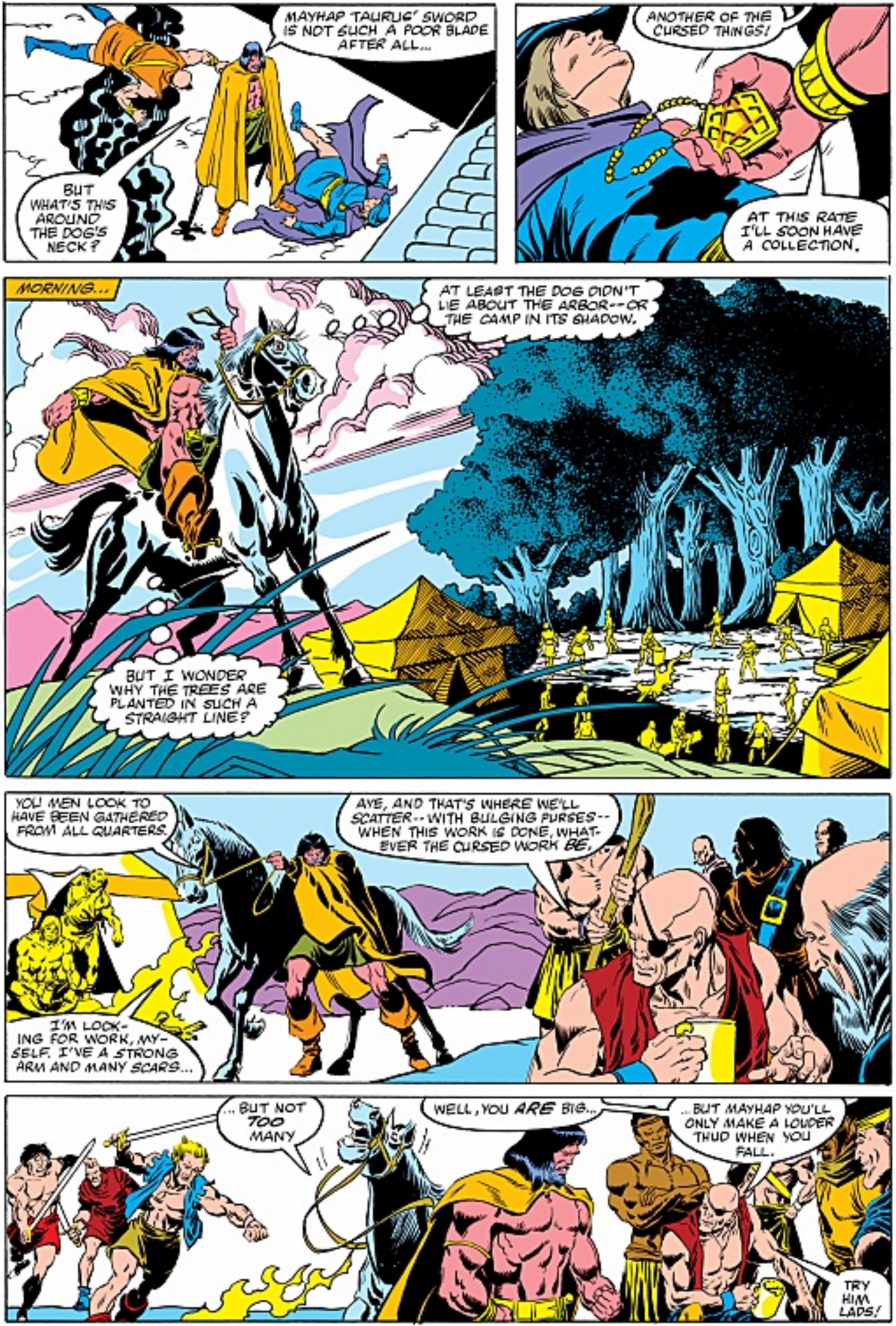

THAT WOULD BE THIS BLADE CONAN, WERE IT NOT YOU ASKING, IT WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN OFFERED--
--BUT RATHER KEPT ON DISPLAY.
GOOD BALANCE... STRONG STEEL... FINELY HONED... BUT THE FEEL IS WRONG, TAURUS...
THERE'S NO BOND..
BUT MY KING--'TIS THE BEST BLADE I'VE EVER FORGED.
NO DOUBT.
AND I'VE SEEN NONE BETTER FORGED BY ANY MAN--WHICH IS WHY YOU SERVE AS MY MASTER SMITH. BUT IT'S STILL NOT QUITE RIGHT FOR ME.
IT TAKES A CERTAIN MAGIC TO MATE THE MAN TO SWORD--A BOND OF BLOOD AND STEEL.
MY FATHER TAUGHT ME THAT--IN CIMMERIA, WHERE HE, TOO, WORKED A FORGE.
A MAN--IF A TRUE WARRIOR HE BE, AND NOT SOME OAF WHO MERELY PRETENDS TO A SWORD--MAY FIND ONLY ONE FITTING BLADE IN ALL HIS LIFETIME.
AND IF HE FAILS TO FIND IT FAST... HIS LIFE MAY BE TOO SHORT TO FIND IT AT ALL.
STEEL KNOWS ITS MASTER. YOU ARE THE MASTER OF THIS BLADE.
THEN LET ME HAMMER AT IT, MY KING, UNTIL IT BECOMES YOUR SERVANT.
FRET NOT, TAURUS-- 'TIS THE BEST BLADE ANY MAN'S HAND COULD SHAPE...
'TIS SIMPLY NOT MINE.
BUT IF YOU ARE NOT COMFORTABLE WITH IT, MY KING, MAYHAP YOU SHOULD NOT TRUST IT TO ANY DANGER.
MAYHAP YOU SHOULD UNDERTAKE NOTHING WHICH COULD FORCE YOU TO USE THE BLADE...

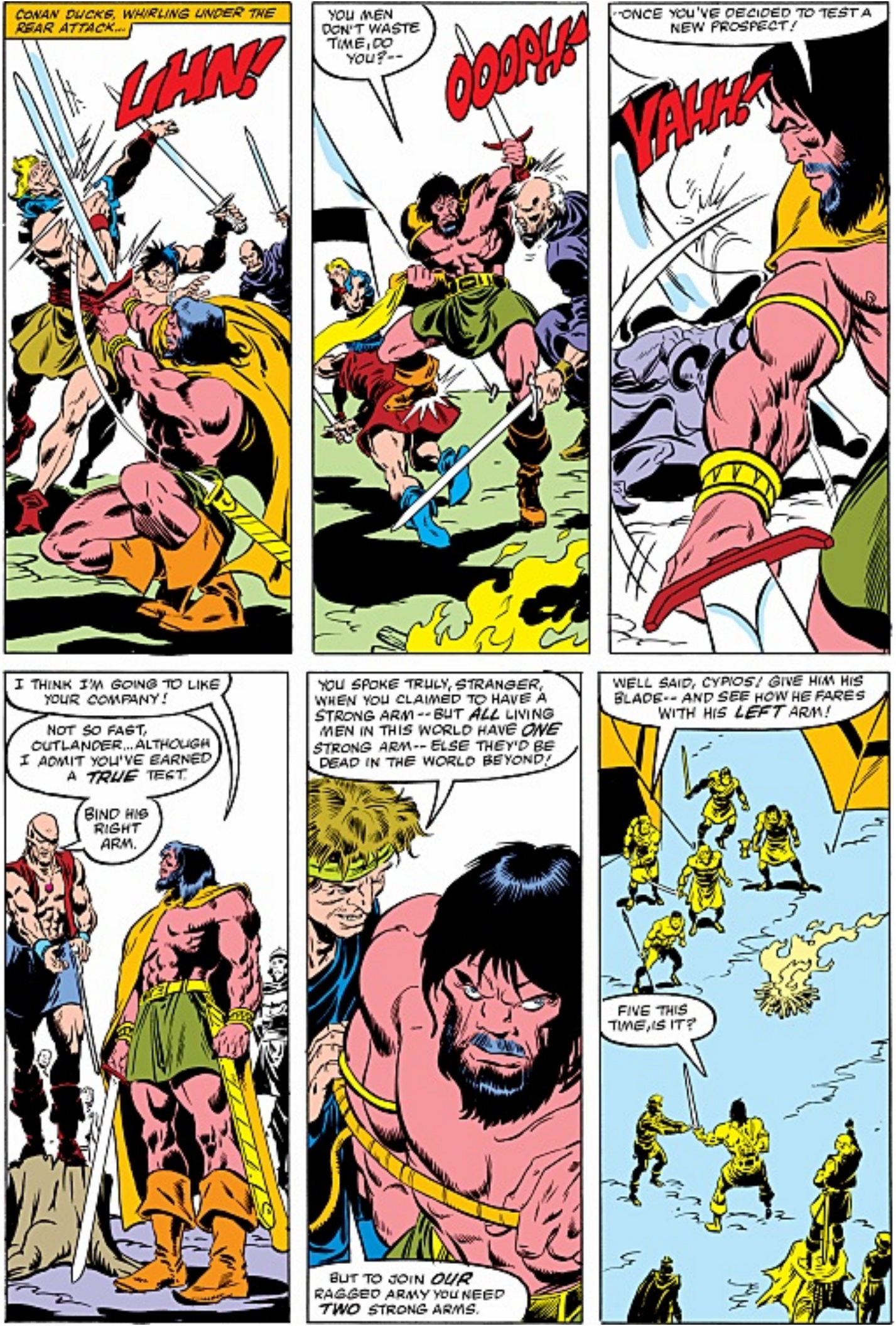

AND MAYHAP YOU'RE RIGHT, TAURUS--CROM KNOWS I'VE HAD THE SAME ADVICE FROM OTHERS.
BUT HOW ELSE, THEN, WILL I REGAIN MY SWORD?
AN HOUR LATER, ASTRIDE HIS FAVORED STEED, CONAN RIDES OUT OF THE CITY'S GATES...
...ALONE.
AHEAD SPRAWL THE WESTERN MOUNTAINS, BEHIND HIM, THE LATE MORNING SUN... AND MANY EYES GLUM OF CAST, AS IF WATCHING A MAN SEEK HIS DOOM.
HE'S TOO STUBBORN, PROSPERO.
AYE, TROCERO... BUT HE IS THE KING.
HE DID IT... AND I DON'T THINK HE COULD OUTLAST ME.
MITRA'S EYES -- I HOPE HE'S NOT GETTING... OLD.
FARE THEE WELL, BARBARIAN OF A KING.
MAY MY IMPERFECT BLADE PROTECT THEE 'GAINST ALL THE DEVILS OF HELL.
I DID MY BEST, AQUILONIAN.
YOU ARE IN THE BOSOM OF MOTHER DANU NOW-- MAY SHE AND EPONA GUIDE YOU.
AND CONAN FOLLOWS HIS SHADOW, NEVER ONCE LOOKING BACK. THE MORNING SUN WOULD ONLY PAIN HIS EYES... AND, MAYHAP, CAUSE THEM TO TEAR. BESIDES, BY LOOKING AHEAD, HE LOOKS BACK TO A PAST FAR MORE REMOTE THAN TARANTIA...
HE LOOKS TO THE DAYS OF HIS YOUTH-- WHEN TIME AND AGAIN, AGAINST ALL ODDS AND ALL BETTER ADVICE, HE DARED THE UNKNOWN ALONE.
AND CONQUERED IT.

THE DAYS WILL STRETCH INTO WEEKS ERE HIS JOURNEY IS DONE. HE WILL PAUSE BUT BRIEFLY AND ONLY WHEN NECESSARY TO THE SURVIVAL OF MAN OR STEED.
AND SO, ACROSS THE WIND-LASHED STEPPES HE RIDES...
...UP THE WESTERN PEAKS THROUGH DRIVING SNOW...
MAJESTIC THEY ARE, HE THINKS, BUT MERE HILLS COMPARED TO THE MOUNTAINS OF HIS HOMELAND IN CIMMERIA.
AND FINALLY, DOWN THE EASTERN SLOPES, AGAIN INTO A WARMER CLIME...
...AND INTO NEMEDIA.
BY THEN, LOOKING DOWN UPON THE SMALL CITY OF THALIA, ANCIENT AND NEARLY FORGOTTEN IN THE MISTS OF ANTIQUITY...
THE PASSAGE HAS BEEN JUST LONG ENOUGH-- MY BEARD IS FULLY GROWN.
SATISFIED THAT HE ENJOYS THE ANONYMITY OF HIS YOUTHFUL YEARS, FROM A LONG TIME BEFORE HE BECAME KING -- AYE, FROM A TIME WHEN HE ROVED THE WORLD AS A THIEF AND REAVER, PIRATE AND MERCENARY...
...CONAN RIDES INTO LOST THALIA.
IN THE TAVERN HE QUERIES THE KEEPER ABOUT A MAN NAMED FALEN -- AN OLD FRIEND, HE SAYS...
AYE, FALEN HAS RECENTLY RETURNED TO THALIA -- JUST THIS MORN, IN FACT -- AND HAS TAKEN NEW QUARTERS ON ONE OF THE WEALTHY STREETS.
THE STREET'S NAME?
ZARONO.

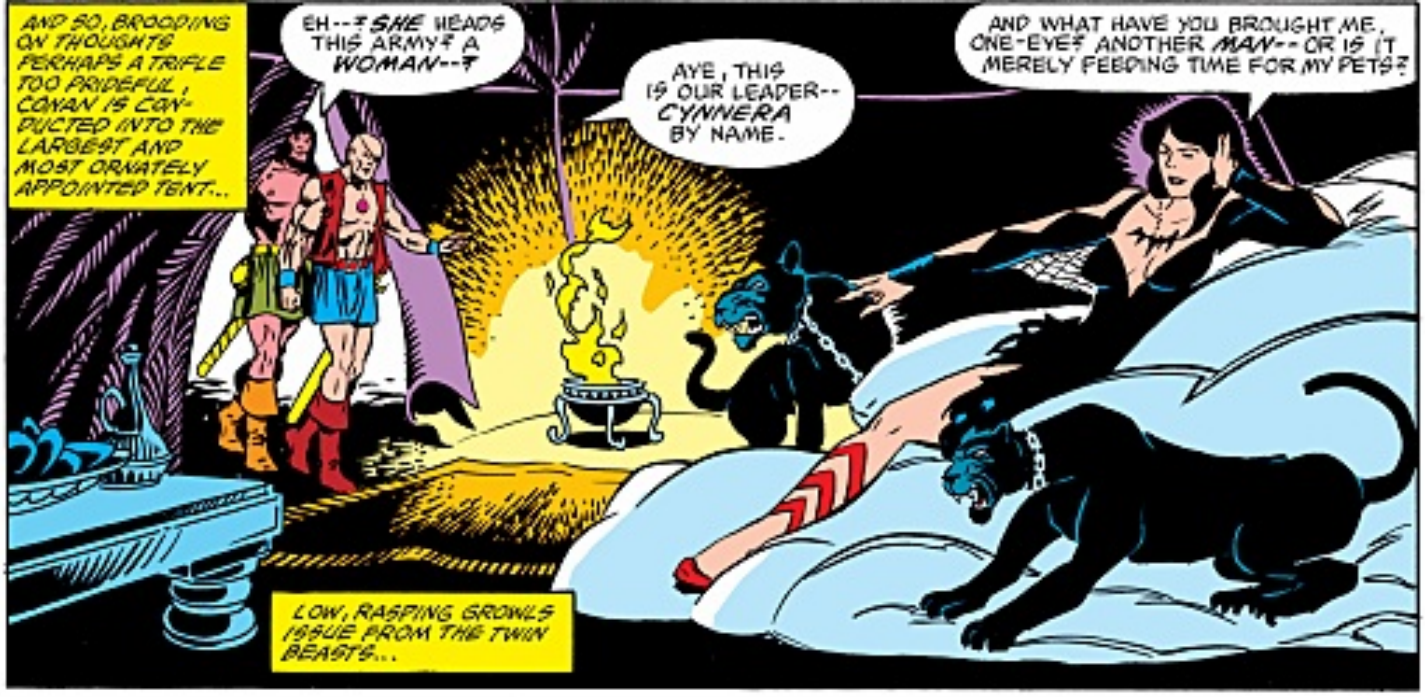

AND BY NIGHTFALL, CONAN IS CLOAKED IN SHADOWS, ACROSS FROM A NEW HOUSE NOW HOSTING A NEW TENANT...
AH! HERE'S THE FILTHY BEGGAR--THOUGH HARDLY A BEGGAR NOW!
IN FACT, IT SEEMS MY FORMER SERVANT NOW BOASTS SERVANTS OF HIS OWN--BODYGUARDS.
MEANING... HE IS TRULY RICH INDEED...
... WITH RICHES AND WEALTH BOUGHT BY A STOLEN SWORD!
HOLD, FALEN! LEST I SULLY YOUR FINE NEW GARMENTS WITH BLOOD!
A THIEF! PROTECT ME! IT'S WHAT I'M PAYING YOU FOR! SLAY HIM!
THE BODYGUARDS, IN THEIR DEFENSE, DO THEIR BEST TO OBEY.
BUT IT IS NOT ENOUGH.


NOW FALEN -- WHERE'S THE SWORD?
WH-WHAT SWORD--? I...I KNOW NOT WHAT YOU --
DON'T LIE TO ME, DOG -- UNLESS YOU WANT YOUR TONGUE TO BURN IN MOLOCH'S FLAMES! YOU GAVE THE SWORD TO THE WRONG ONES!
YOU WERE DECEIVED! IT WAS TO COME TO ME -- THENCE TO BE CONVEYED TO OUR MASTER!
YOU MEAN I...I MADE A MISTAKE?!
BUT THE GOLD THEY GAVE ME --
-- WAS THE AGREED SUM, LEARNED BY THEIR SPIES! WITHOUT SUCH KNOWLEDGE, HOW ELSE COULD THEY HOPE TO DECEIVE YOU?!
NO! I DID NOT MEAN TO MAKE SUCH A MISTAKE! I AM LOYAL, I SWEAR TO YOU!
IT WAS AN HONEST MISTAKE! I EMBARKED ON NO TREACHERY OR --
I KNOW THAT! TELL ME WHERE YOU TOOK THE SWORD AND I MAY SHOW YOU MERCY!
I...I TOOK IT TO THE MERCENARY CAMP BY THE ARBOR -- THE GIANT TREES -- IN THE HILLS TO THE EAST...
...NO MORE THAN AN HOUR'S RIDE!
THEY CLAIMED TO REPRESENT OUR LEADER! I --
THEN, IN A GLINT OF MOONLIGHT, FALEN CATCHES SIGHT OF UNMISTAKABLE STEEL-BLUE EYES ABOVE THE MASKING BEARD...
CONAN! THE KING!
AND HE KNOWS A LAST MOMENT OF HORROR...
AYE, DOG -- THE KING WHO BROOKS TREACHERY WITH SHORT PATIENCE!
...BEFORE ENTERING THE DARKNESS OF ETERNITY.


MAYHAP TAURUS' SWORD IS NOT SUCH A POOR BLADE AFTER ALL...
BUT WHAT'S THIS AROUND THE DOG'S NECK?
ANOTHER OF THE CURSED THINGS!
AT THIS RATE I'LL SOON HAVE A COLLECTION.
MORNING...
AT LEAST THE DOG DIDN'T LIE ABOUT THE ARBOR--OR THE CAMP IN ITS SHADOW.
BUT I WONDER WHY THE TREES ARE PLANTED IN SUCH A STRAIGHT LINE?
YOU MEN LOOK TO HAVE BEEN GATHERED FROM ALL QUARTERS.
AYE, AND THAT'S WHERE WE'LL SCATTER--WITH BULGING PURSES--WHEN THIS WORK IS DONE, WHATEVER THE CURSED WORK BE.
I'M LOOKING FOR WORK, MYSELF. I'VE A STRONG ARM AND MANY SCARS...
..BUT NOT TOO MANY
WELL, YOU ARE BIG...
..BUT MAYHAP YOU'LL ONLY MAKE A LOUDER THUD WHEN YOU FALL.
TRY HIM, LADS!


CONAN DUCKS, WHIRLING UNDER THE REAR ATTACK...
UHN!
YOU MEN DON'T WASTE TIME, DO YOU?--
OOOPH!
--ONCE YOU'VE DECIDED TO TEST A NEW PROSPECT!
YAHH!
I THINK I'M GOING TO LIKE YOUR COMPANY!
NOT SO FAST, OUTLANDER...ALTHOUGH I ADMIT YOU'VE EARNED A TRUE TEST.
BIND HIS RIGHT ARM.
YOU SPOKE TRULY, STRANGER, WHEN YOU CLAIMED TO HAVE A STRONG ARM--BUT ALL LIVING MEN IN THIS WORLD HAVE ONE STRONG ARM--ELSE THEY'D BE DEAD IN THE WORLD BEYOND!
BUT TO JOIN OUR RAGGED ARMY YOU NEED TWO STRONG ARMS.
WELL SAID, CYPIOS! GIVE HIM HIS BLADE--AND SEE HOW HE FARES WITH HIS LEFT ARM!
FIVE THIS TIME, IS IT?

VERY WELL!
AGH-H!
YOU'LL FORGIVE ME IF IT TAKES A MITE LONGER...
...BUT IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I LAST ENCOUNTERED SUCH RARE SPORT!
AND SINCE I FIND MYSELF ENJOYING IT...
...WHY NOT PROLONG THE PLEASURE, eh?
LOOK OUT! HE'S CUT THE TENT-POLE!
NOW-- DO YOU WANT THEM GUTTED, BEHEADED, OR SIMPLY TRUSSED UP AS THEY ARE?
WELL... WELL, WELL, WELL. FORGIVE OUR SPORT, FRIEND. IF I'D KNOWN YOUR METTLE--
AYE-- AND IF I'VE PASSED THE TEST, SHOULDN'T YOU INTRODUCE ME TO YOUR LEADER?
OF COURSE-- THIS WAY.
AGAIN YOU'VE SERVED ME WELL, BLADE. MAYHAP IT'S NOT SWORD...
..BUT THE MAN WHO WIELDS IT.


AND SO, BROODING ON THOUGHTS PERHAPS A TRIFLE TOO PRIDEFUL, CONAN IS CONDUCTED INTO THE LARGEST AND MOST ORNATELY APPOINTED TENT...
EH--? SHE HEADS THIS ARMY? A WOMAN--?
AYE, THIS IS OUR LEADER--CYNNERA BY NAME.
AND WHAT HAVE YOU BROUGHT ME, ONE-EYE? ANOTHER MAN--OR IS IT MERELY FEEDING TIME FOR MY PETS?
LOW, RASPING GROWLS ISSUE FROM THE TWIN BEASTS...

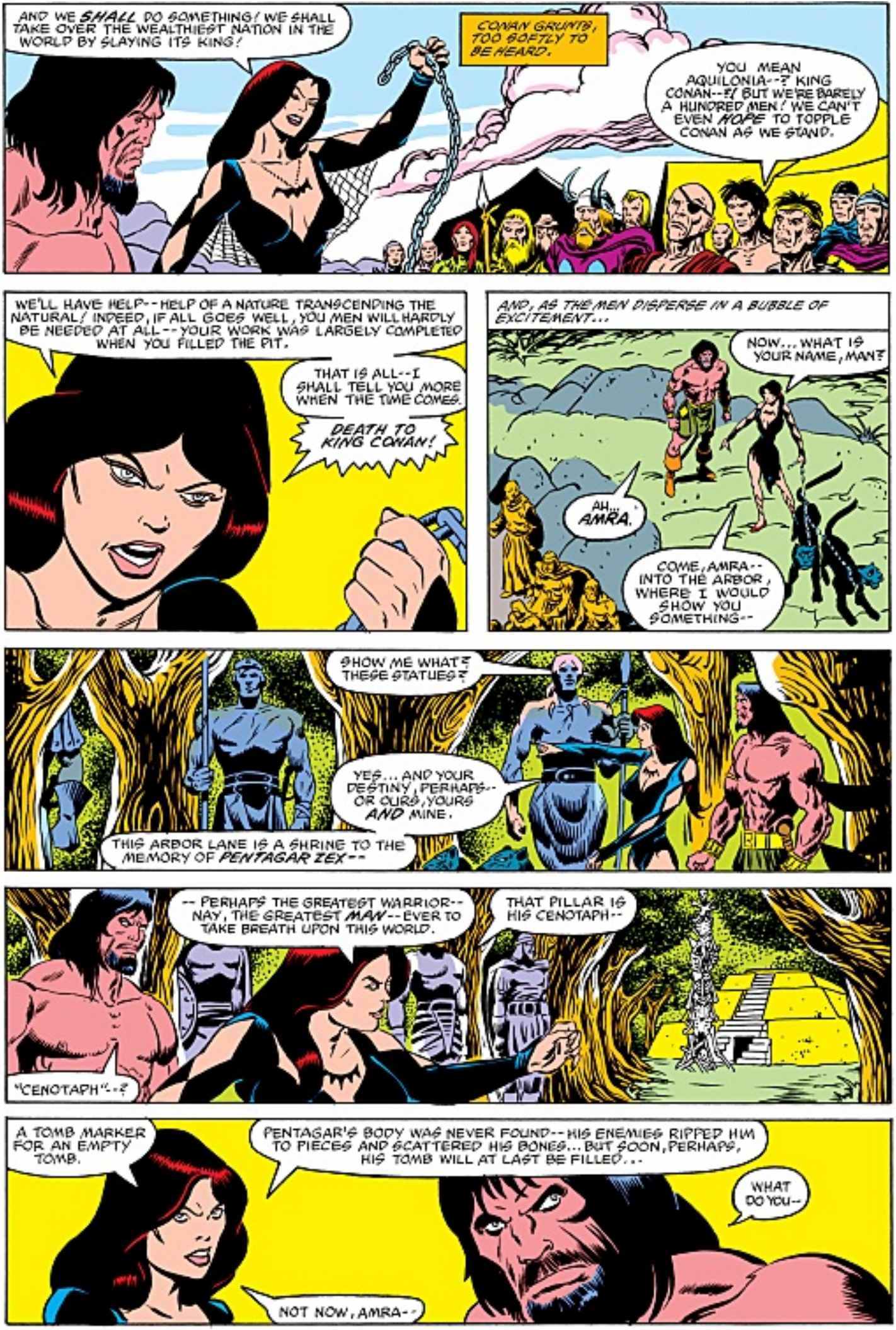
AND LISTENING TO THE ONE-EYED MAN'S WHISPERS, CYNNERA GAZES AT CONAN WITH FIRST NARROWED, THEN WIDENED EYES...
MMM... I SEE.

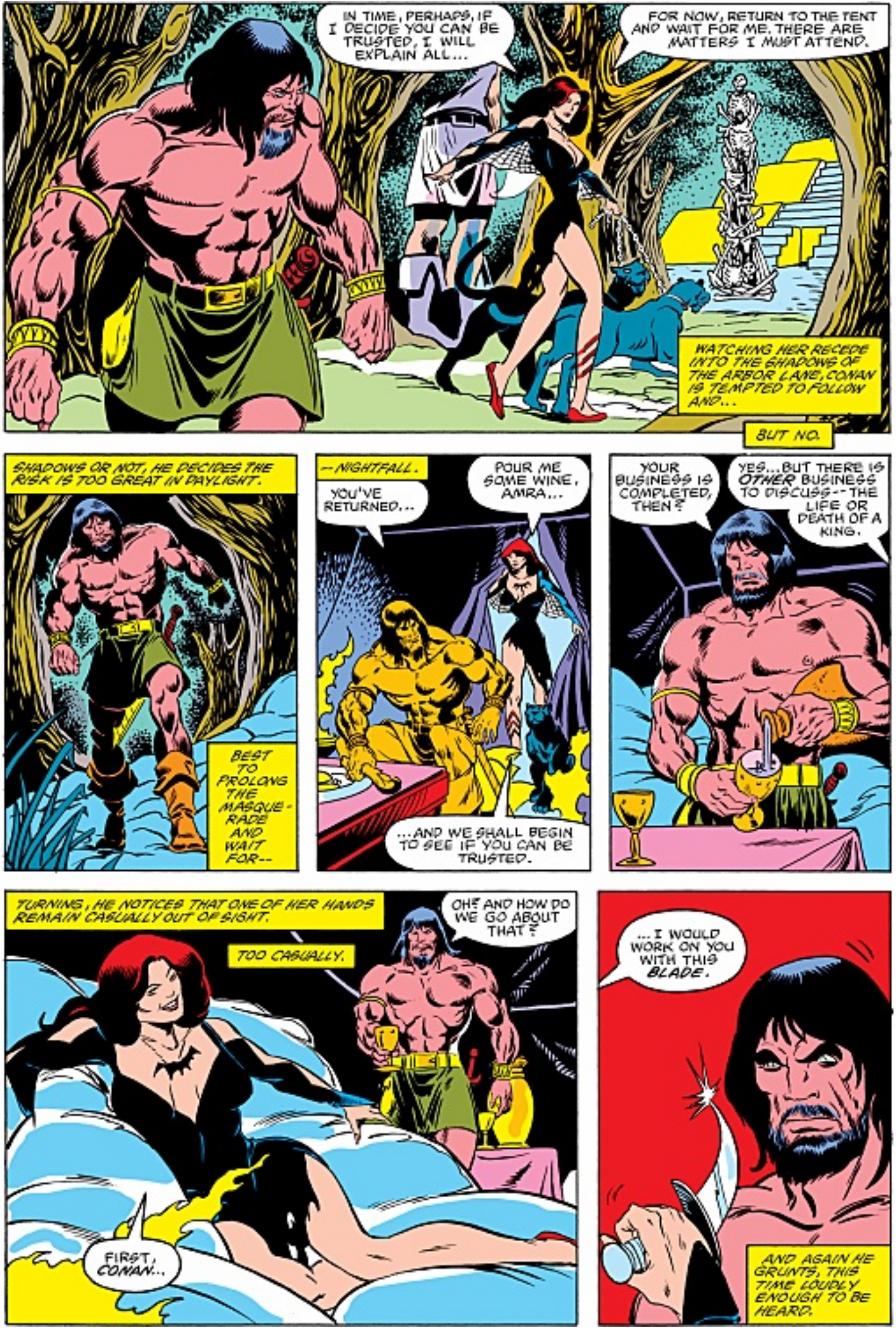
IN VIEW OF YOUR LEFT-HANDED PROWESS, MAN, IT SEEMS YOU HAVE A JOB. INDEED, WITH MUSCLES AS BROAD AS YOURS...
...YOU DESERVE TO BE MY PERSONAL BODYGUARD.

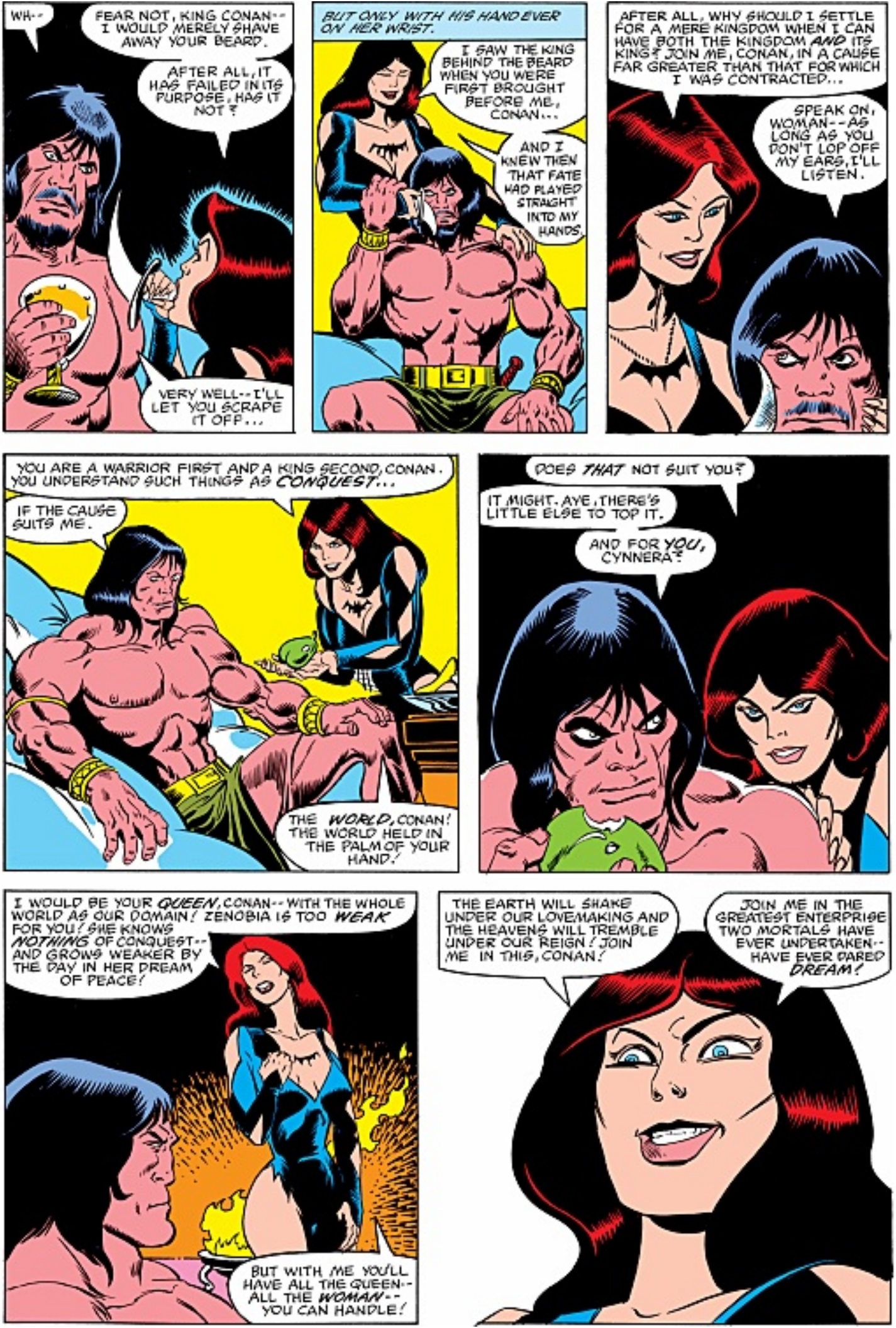
ALONG WITH YOUR OTHER TWO PETS?
YOU SHALL ENJOY SPECIAL PRIVILEGES, I ASSURE YOU. DO YOU ACCEPT THE JOB?
I'D BE A FOOL TO REFUSE, WOULDN'T I?

GOOD--THEN YOUR FIRST DUTY WILL BE TO PROTECT ME FROM MY OWN MEN.
THEIR FEAR OF MY CATS IS BEGINNING TO WANE, I THINK, AND IT'S PAST TIME TO ADDRESS THEM ON THE NATURE OF OUR ENTERPRISE...

AND SO, AS THE ROUGH MEN GATHER...
YOU'VE BEEN PATIENT--BUT FOR VARIOUS REASONS, OUR GOAL HAD TO BE KEPT SECRET UNTIL NOW...
WHAT IS IT, THEN, CYNNERA? THE PAY'S BEEN GOOD, BUT A MAN LIKES TO DO SOMETHING...!


AND WE SHALL DO SOMETHING! WE SHALL TAKE OVER THE WEALTHIEST NATION IN THE WORLD BY SLAYING ITS KING!
CONAN GRUNTS, TOO SOFTLY TO BE HEARD.
YOU MEAN AQUILONIA--? KING CONAN--?! BUT WE'RE BARELY A HUNDRED MEN! WE CAN'T EVEN HOPE TO TOPPLE CONAN AS WE STAND.
WE'LL HAVE HELP--HELP OF A NATURE TRANSCENDING THE NATURAL! INDEED, IF ALL GOES WELL, YOU MEN WILL HARDLY BE NEEDED AT ALL--YOUR WORK WAS LARGELY COMPLETED WHEN YOU FILLED THE PIT.
THAT IS ALL--I SHALL TELL YOU MORE WHEN THE TIME COMES.
DEATH TO KING CONAN!
AND, AS THE MEN DISPERSE IN A BUBBLE OF EXCITEMENT...
NOW... WHAT IS YOUR NAME, MAN?
AH... AMRA.
COME, AMRA--INTO THE ARBOR, WHERE I WOULD SHOW YOU SOMETHING--
SHOW ME WHAT? THESE STATUES?
YES... AND YOUR DESTINY, PERHAPS--OR OURS, YOURS AND MINE.
THIS ARBOR LANE IS A SHRINE TO THE MEMORY OF PENTAGAR ZEX--
-- PERHAPS THE GREATEST WARRIOR--NAY, THE GREATEST MAN--EVER TO TAKE BREATH UPON THIS WORLD.
THAT PILLAR IS HIS CENOTAPH--
"CENOTAPH"--?
A TOMB MARKER FOR AN EMPTY TOMB.
PENTAGAR'S BODY WAS NEVER FOUND--HIS ENEMIES RIPPED HIM TO PIECES AND SCATTERED HIS BONES... BUT SOON, PERHAPS, HIS TOMB WILL AT LAST BE FILLED...
WHAT DO YOU--
NOT NOW, AMRA--


IN TIME, PERHAPS, IF I DECIDE YOU CAN BE TRUSTED, I WILL EXPLAIN ALL...
FOR NOW, RETURN TO THE TENT AND WAIT FOR ME. THERE ARE MATTERS I MUST ATTEND.
WATCHING HER RECEDE INTO THE SHADOWS OF THE ARBOR LANE, CONAN IS TEMPTED TO FOLLOW AND...
BUT NO.
SHADOWS OR NOT, HE DECIDES THE RISK IS TOO GREAT IN DAYLIGHT.
BEST TO PROLONG THE MASQUERADE AND WAIT FOR--
--NIGHTFALL.
YOU'VE RETURNED...
POUR ME SOME WINE, AMRA...
...AND WE SHALL BEGIN TO SEE IF YOU CAN BE TRUSTED.
YOUR BUSINESS IS COMPLETED, THEN?
YES...BUT THERE IS OTHER BUSINESS TO DISCUSS--THE LIFE OR DEATH OF A KING.
TURNING, HE NOTICES THAT ONE OF HER HANDS REMAIN CASUALLY OUT OF SIGHT.
TOO CASUALLY.
OH? AND HOW DO WE GO ABOUT THAT?
FIRST, CONAN...
...I WOULD WORK ON YOU WITH THIS BLADE.
AND AGAIN HE GRUNTS, THIS TIME LOUDLY ENOUGH TO BE HEARD.


WH--
FEAR NOT, KING CONAN--I WOULD MERELY SHAVE AWAY YOUR BEARD.
AFTER ALL, IT HAS FAILED IN ITS PURPOSE, HAS IT NOT?
VERY WELL--I'LL LET YOU SCRAPE IT OFF...
BUT ONLY WITH HIS HAND EVER ON HER WRIST.
I SAW THE KING BEHIND THE BEARD WHEN YOU WERE FIRST BROUGHT BEFORE ME, CONAN...
AND I KNEW THEN THAT FATE HAD PLAYED STRAIGHT INTO MY HANDS.
AFTER ALL, WHY SHOULD I SETTLE FOR A MERE KINGDOM WHEN I CAN HAVE BOTH THE KINGDOM AND ITS KING? JOIN ME, CONAN, IN A CAUSE FAR GREATER THAN THAT FOR WHICH I WAS CONTRACTED...
SPEAK ON, WOMAN--AS LONG AS YOU DON'T LOP OFF MY EARS, I'LL LISTEN.
YOU ARE A WARRIOR FIRST AND A KING SECOND, CONAN. YOU UNDERSTAND SUCH THINGS AS CONQUEST...
IF THE CAUSE SUITS ME.
THE WORLD, CONAN! THE WORLD HELD IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND!
DOES THAT NOT SUIT YOU?
IT MIGHT. AYE, THERE'S LITTLE ELSE TO TOP IT.
AND FOR YOU, CYNNERA?
I WOULD BE YOUR QUEEN, CONAN--WITH THE WHOLE WORLD AS OUR DOMAIN! ZENOBIA IS TOO WEAK FOR YOU! SHE KNOWS NOTHING OF CONQUEST--AND GROWS WEAKER BY THE DAY IN HER DREAM OF PEACE!
BUT WITH ME YOU'LL HAVE ALL THE QUEEN--ALL THE WOMAN--YOU CAN HANDLE!
THE EARTH WILL SHAKE UNDER OUR LOVEMAKING AND THE HEAVENS WILL TREMBLE UNDER OUR REIGN! JOIN ME IN THIS, CONAN!
JOIN ME IN THE GREATEST ENTERPRISE TWO MORTALS HAVE EVER UNDERTAKEN--HAVE EVER DARED DREAM!

JOIN ME, BEAUTIFUL, STRONG CONAN... IN A PASSION SUCH AS LIFE HAS NEVER BEFORE KNOWN!
SHE LEANS FORWARD WANTONLY, A CURIOUS PENDANT SLIPPING FROM HER BODICE TO DANSLE BEFORE CONAN'S EYES...
AYE, CYNNERA-- I'LL JOIN YOU.

AFTER ALL, I HAVEN'T FELT THE EARTH SHAKE IN DAYS...

HOURS PASS UNDER THE HAUNTING ENCHANTMENT OF MOONLIGHT...

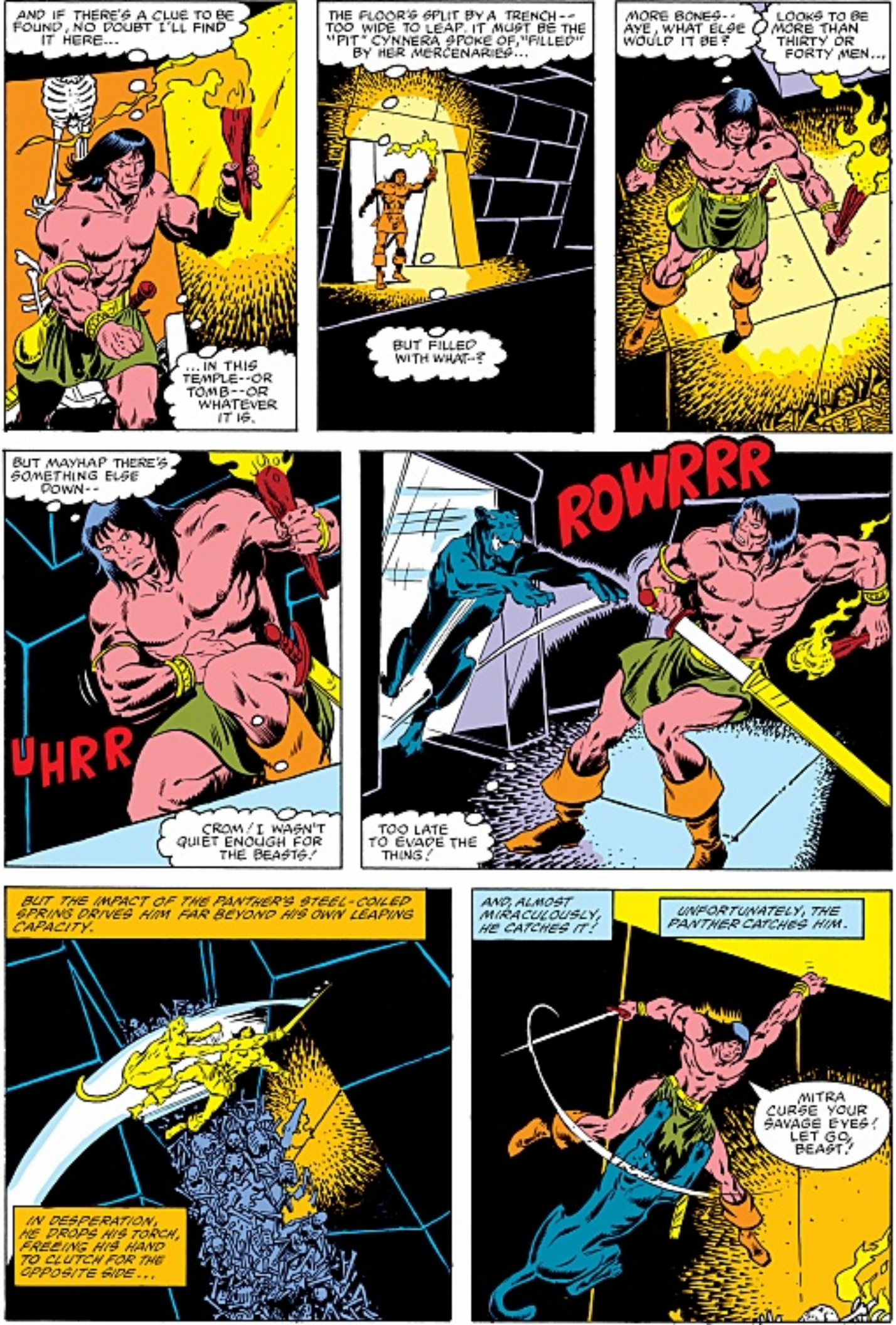
...UNTIL CYNNERA AT LAST SLIPS INTO THE VOID OF SLEEP.
THIS MAKES THE THIRD OF THESE CURSED MEDALLIONS-- AND EVEN IF I DON'T KNOW WHY, I HAVE A FEELING THEY POSSESS SOME KIND OF POWER...
IT MAY HELP, THEN, TO SEPARATE CYNNERA FROM HERS.

WAITING TO MAKE CERTAIN CYNNERA DOES NOT STIR, CONAN FINALLY STEALS FROM THE OPULENT TENT...
...AND CREEPS WITH PANTHERISH STRIDE TOWARD THE ARBOR.

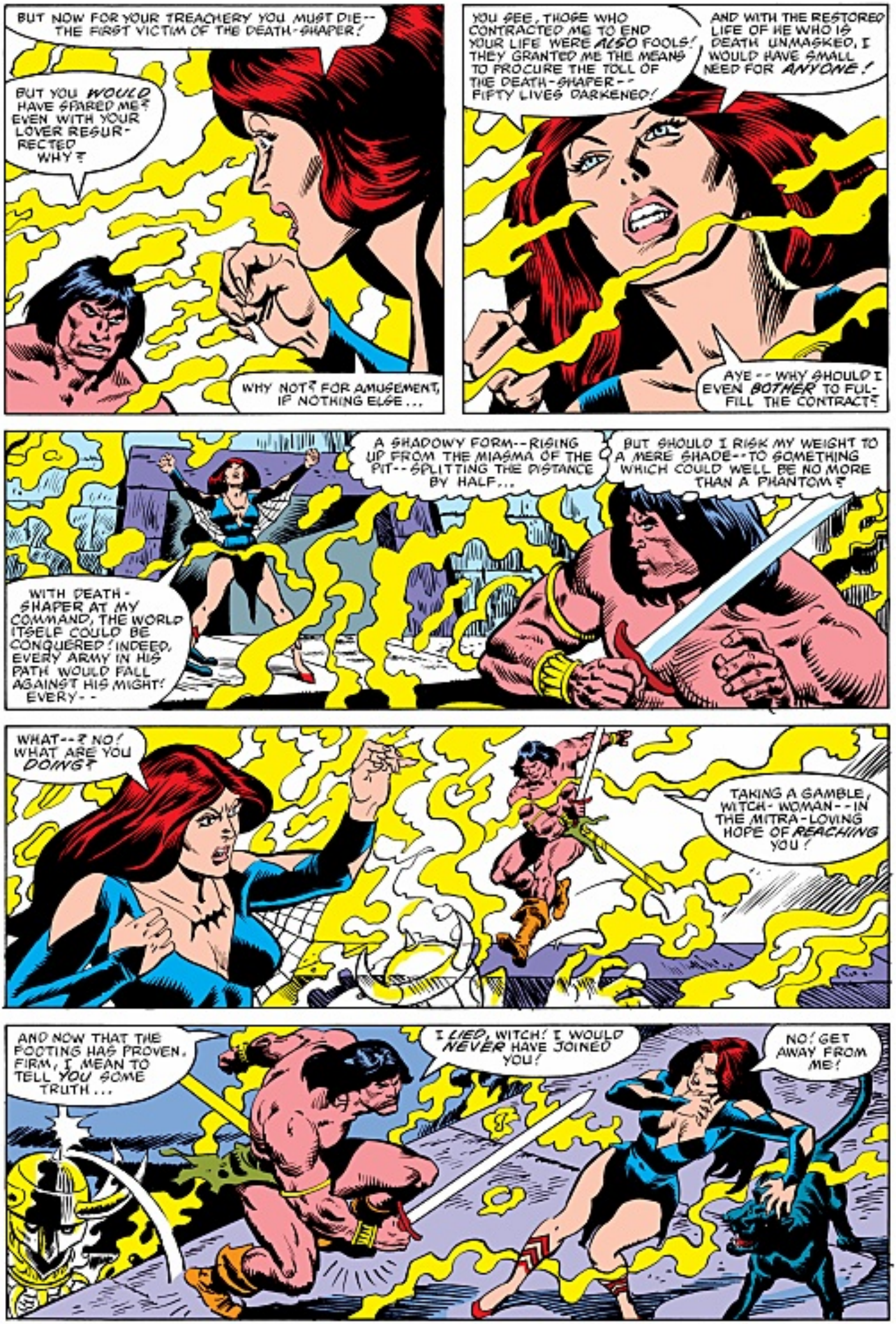
AS FOR THE REAL THING...
WOULD THAT HE HAD PAID AS MUCH ATTENTION TO THE WOMAN'S PETS.
UHRRR

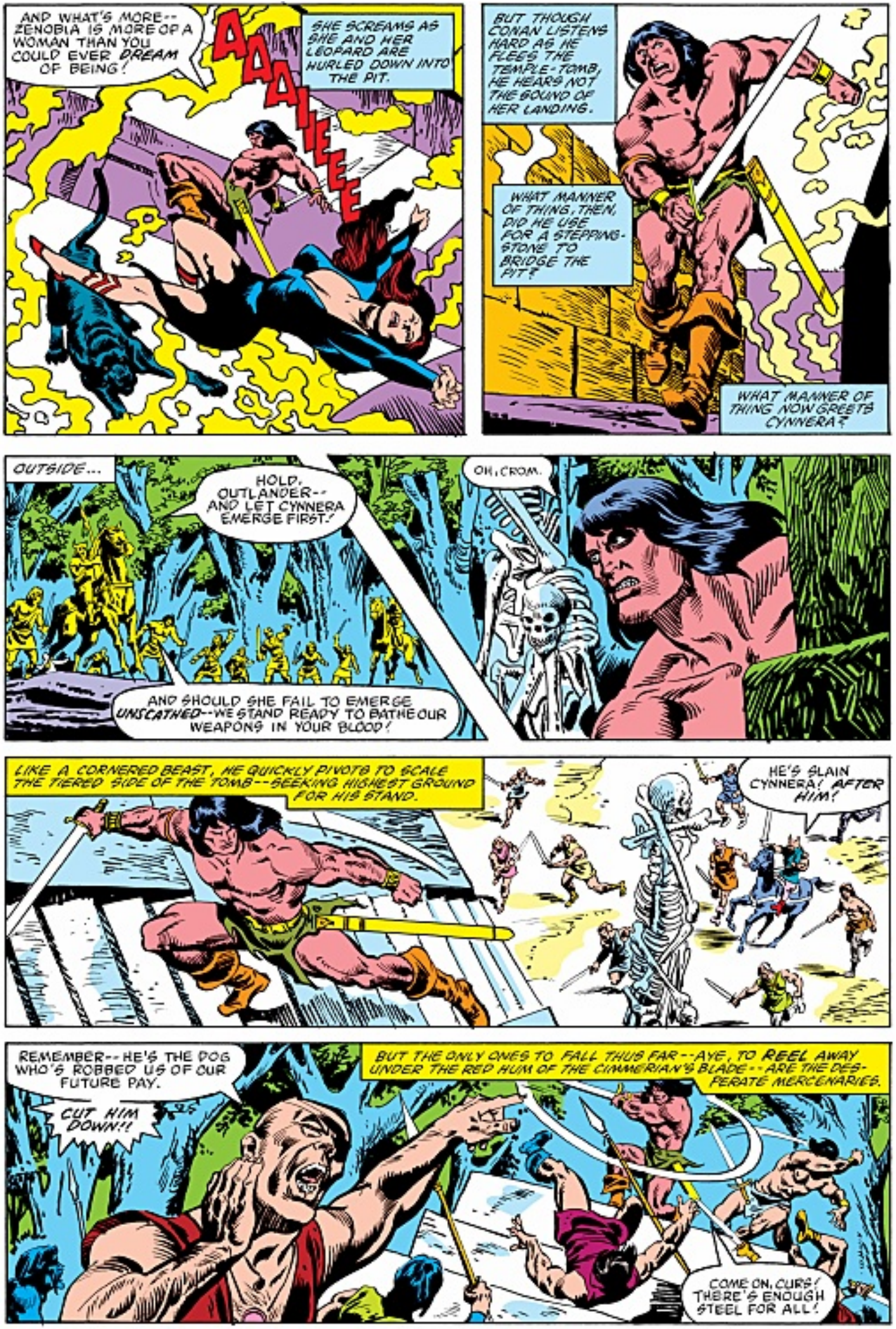
EH--?

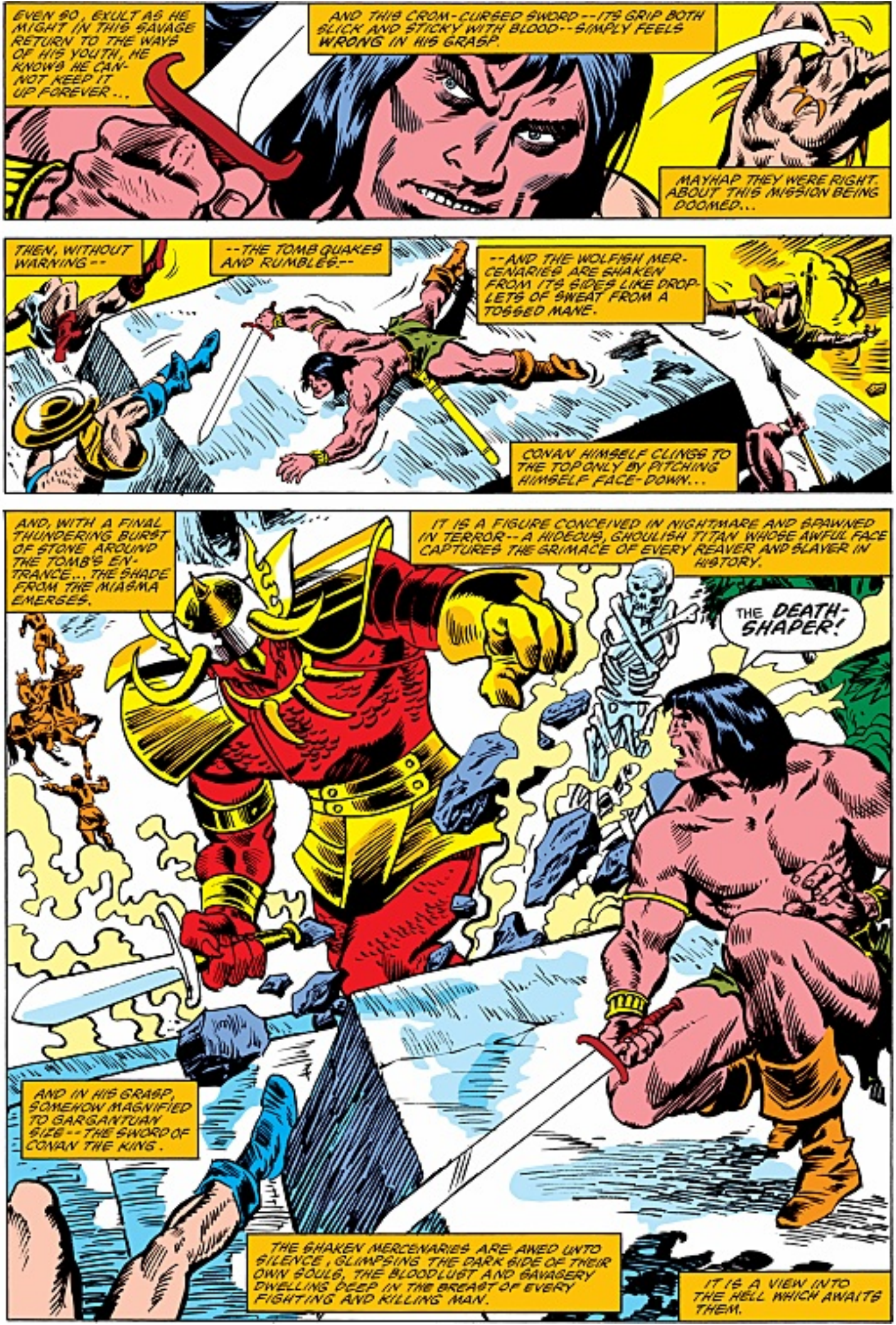
BONES--AS I THOUGHT-- AND HUMAN ONES...BUT AS GRISLY A SIGHT AS IT IS, I SUSPECT THERE'S MORE TO THIS "CENOTAPH" THAN MEETS THE EYES.


AND IF THERE'S A CLUE TO BE FOUND, NO DOUBT I'LL FIND IT HERE...
...IN THIS TEMPLE--OR TOMB--OR WHATEVER IT IS.
THE FLOOR'S SPLIT BY A TRENCH--TOO WIDE TO LEAP. IT MUST BE THE "PIT" CYNNERA SPOKE OF, "FILLED" BY HER MERCENARIES...
BUT FILLED WITH WHAT--?
MORE BONES--AYE, WHAT ELSE WOULD IT BE?
LOOKS TO BE MORE THAN THIRTY OR FORTY MEN...
BUT MAYHAP THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE DOWN--
UHRR
CROM! I WASN'T QUIET ENOUGH FOR THE BEASTS!
ROWRRR
TOO LATE TO EVADE THE THING!
BUT THE IMPACT OF THE PANTHER'S STEEL-COILED SPRING DRIVES HIM FAR BEYOND HIS OWN LEAPING CAPACITY.
IN DESPERATION, HE DROPS HIS TORCH, FREEING HIS HAND TO CLUTCH FOR THE OPPOSITE SIDE...
AND, ALMOST MIRACULOUSLY, HE CATCHES IT!
UNFORTUNATELY, THE PANTHER CATCHES HIM.
MITRA CURSE YOUR SAVAGE EYES! LET GO, BEAST!

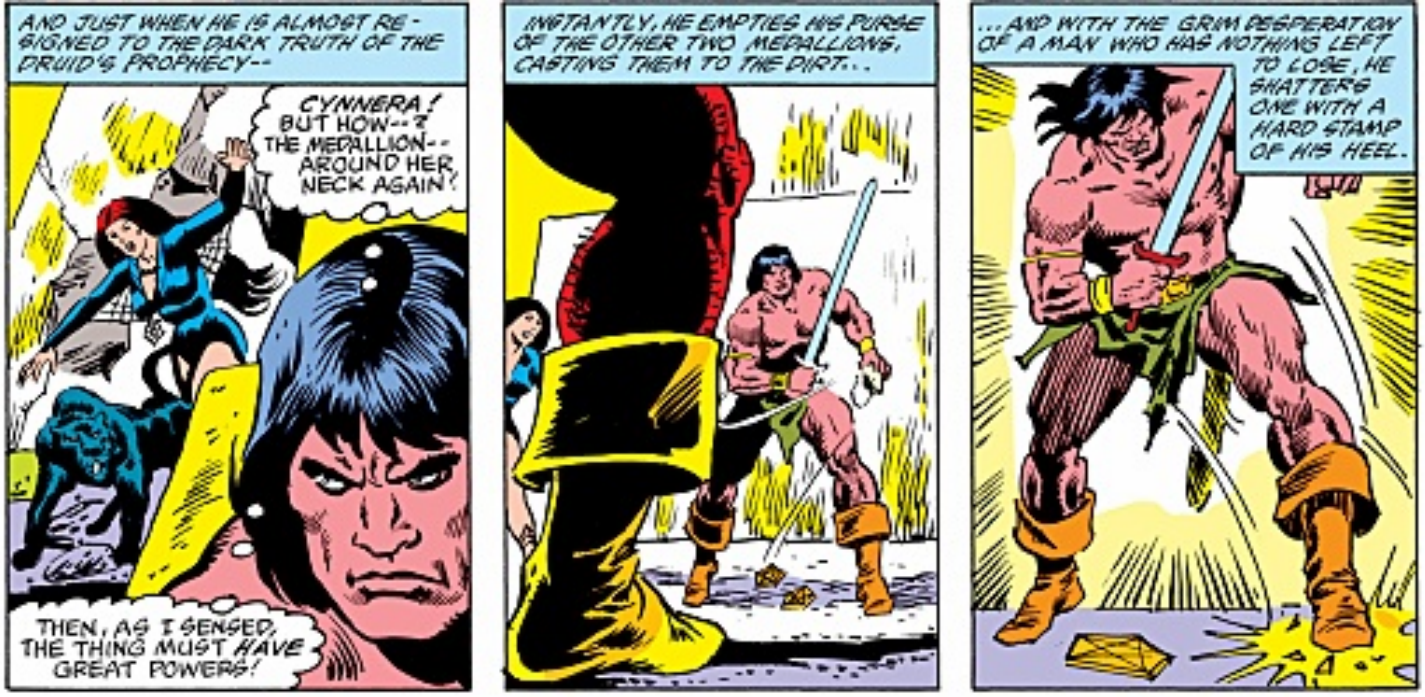
LET GO, I SAID!
THE SLASH DOES THE DEED, FREEING A SCARLET SPRAY INTO THE LONG PIT...
BUT EVEN AS THE BEAST GOES LIMP, ITS TALONS RAKE DOWN CONAN'S LOINCLOTH, RIPPING THE TOP OF HIS PURSE AND RELEASING A SINGLE ITEM OF ITS CONTENTS...
MY TALISMAN--!
IT'S GONE! YOU STOLE IT FROM MY VERY NECK-- ONE OF THE LAST THREE FETISHES NEEDED TO WORK THE RESURRECTION!
FOR A MOMENT, CONAN ASSUMES SHE MEANS THE OTHER TWO TALISMANS STILL SAFELY TUCKED IN HIS PURSE--BUT THEN, AS HE SEES THE PIT BOILING WITH A SEETHING MIASMA, HE REALIZES THAT THE OTHER TWO "FETISHES" HAVE ALREADY BEEN ADDED TO THE GRUEL...
FIRE... AND BLOOD... AND A TALISMAN OF PENTAGAR ZEX!
THEN MY TORCH... AND THE PANTHER'S BLOOD...
YES! YOU'VE BEGUN IT, FOOL! NO LONGER DOES THE CENOTAPH MARK A PLACE OF DEATH! IT NOW MARKS A PLACE OF BIRTH--FOR THE SPAWNING OF DEATH!
THE BIRTH OF THE DEATH-SHAPER...
YES! AND IN RETURN FOR HIS RENEWED LIFE HERE IN THE WORLD OF MEN--
--THE DEATH-SHAPER HAS AGREED TO SURRENDER MY LOVER PENTAGAR ZEX BACK FROM THE DEAD!
YOUR LOVER?! BUT HE DIED AGES AGO!
YES, MAN... I HAVE WAITED A LONG TIME! STILL, I WOULD HAVE SPARED YOU-- WE WOULD HAVE SPARED YOU, PENTAGAR AND I, NOT AS MY KING, BUT AS A SLAVE, AT LEAST...

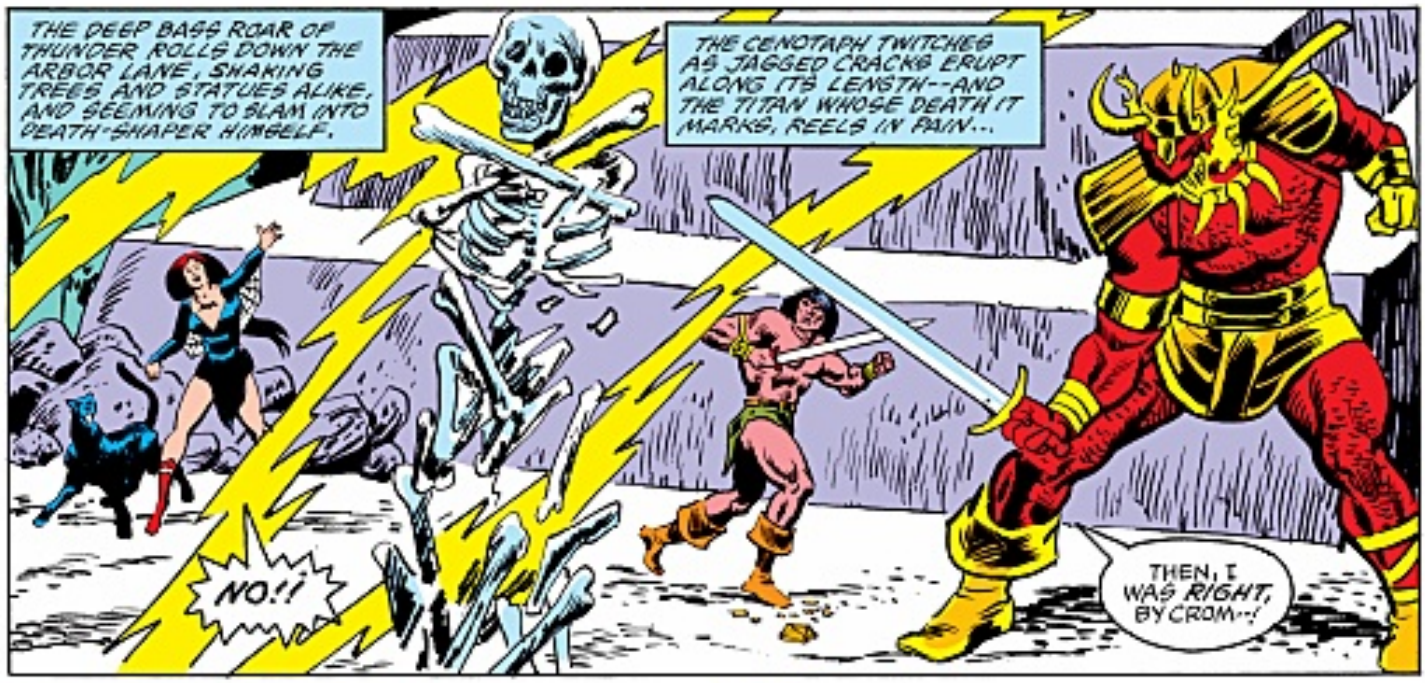

BUT NOW FOR YOUR TREACHERY YOU MUST DIE-- THE FIRST VICTIM OF THE DEATH-SHAPER!
BUT YOU WOULD HAVE SPARED ME? EVEN WITH YOUR LOVER RESURRECTED WHY?
WHY NOT? FOR AMUSEMENT, IF NOTHING ELSE...
YOU SEE, THOSE WHO CONTRACTED ME TO END YOUR LIFE WERE ALSO FOOLS! THEY GRANTED ME THE MEANS TO PROCURE THE TOLL OF THE DEATH-SHAPER-- FIFTY LIVES DARKENED!
AND WITH THE RESTORED LIFE OF HE WHO IS DEATH UNMASKED, I WOULD HAVE SMALL NEED FOR ANYONE!
AYE-- WHY SHOULD I EVEN BOTHER TO FULFILL THE CONTRACT?
A SHADOWY FORM--RISING UP FROM THE MIASMA OF THE PIT--SPLITTING THE DISTANCE BY HALF...
BUT SHOULD I RISK MY WEIGHT TO A MERE SHADE--TO SOMETHING WHICH COULD WELL BE NO MORE THAN A PHANTOM?
WITH DEATH-SHAPER AT MY COMMAND, THE WORLD ITSELF COULD BE CONQUERED! INDEED, EVERY ARMY IN HIS PATH WOULD FALL AGAINST HIS MIGHT! EVERY--
WHAT--? NO! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
TAKING A GAMBLE, WITCH-WOMAN--IN THE MITRA-LOVING HOPE OF REACHING YOU!
AND NOW THAT THE FOOTING HAS PROVEN FIRM, I MEAN TO TELL YOU SOME TRUTH...
I LIED, WITCH! I WOULD NEVER HAVE JOINED YOU!
NO! GET AWAY FROM ME!

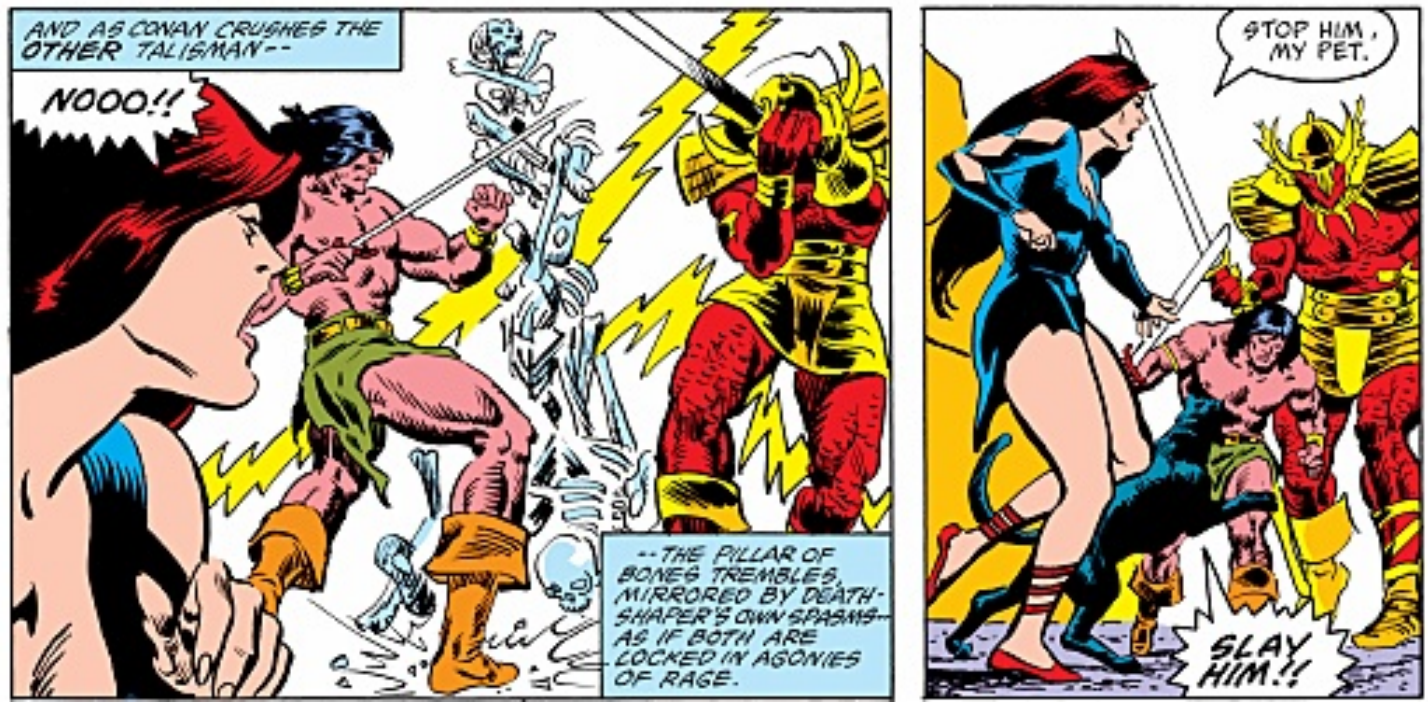

AND WHAT'S MORE--ZENOBIA IS MORE OF A WOMAN THAN YOU COULD EVER DREAM OF BEING!
AAAIEEEE
SHE SCREAMS AS SHE AND HER LEOPARD ARE HURLED DOWN INTO THE PIT.
BUT THOUGH CONAN LISTENS HARD AS HE FLEES THE TEMPLE-TOMB, HE HEARS NOT THE SOUND OF HER LANDING.
WHAT MANNER OF THING, THEN, DID HE USE FOR A STEPPING-STONE TO BRIDGE THE PIT?
WHAT MANNER OF THING NOW GREETS CYNNERA?
OUTSIDE...
HOLD, OUTLANDER--AND LET CYNNERA EMERGE FIRST!
OH, CROM.
AND SHOULD SHE FAIL TO EMERGE UNSCATHED--WE STAND READY TO BATHE OUR WEAPONS IN YOUR BLOOD!
LIKE A CORNERED BEAST, HE QUICKLY PIVOTS TO SCALE THE TIERED SIDE OF THE TOMB--SEEKING HIGHEST GROUND FOR HIS STAND.
HE'S SLAIN CYNNERA! AFTER HIM!
REMEMBER--HE'S THE DOG WHO'S ROBBED US OF OUR FUTURE PAY.
CUT HIM DOWN!!
BUT THE ONLY ONES TO FALL THUS FAR--AYE, TO REEL AWAY UNDER THE RED HUM OF THE CIMMERIAN'S BLADE--ARE THE DESPERATE MERCENARIES.
COME ON, CURS! THERE'S ENOUGH STEEL FOR ALL!


EVEN SO, EXULT AS HE MIGHT IN THIS SAVAGE RETURN TO THE WAYS OF HIS YOUTH, HE KNOWS HE CANNOT KEEP IT UP FOREVER...
AND THIS CROM-CURSED SWORD--ITS GRIP BOTH SLICK AND STICKY WITH BLOOD--SIMPLY FEELS WRONG IN HIS GRASP.
MAYHAP THEY WERE RIGHT. ABOUT THIS MISSION BEING DOOMED...
THEN, WITHOUT WARNING--
--THE TOMB QUAKES AND RUMBLES.--
--AND THE WOLFISH MERCENARIES ARE SHAKEN FROM ITS SIDES LIKE DROPLETS OF SWEAT FROM A TOSSED MANE.
CONAN HIMSELF CLINGS TO THE TOP ONLY BY PITCHING HIMSELF FACE-DOWN...
AND, WITH A FINAL THUNDERING BURST OF STONE AROUND THE TOMB'S ENTRANCE... THE SHADE FROM THE MIASMA EMERGES.
IT IS A FIGURE CONCEIVED IN NIGHTMARE AND SPAWNED IN TERROR--A HIDEOUS, GHOULISH TITAN WHOSE AWFUL FACE CAPTURES THE GRIMACE OF EVERY REAVER AND SLAVER IN HISTORY.
THE DEATH-SHAPER!
AND IN HIS GRASP, SOMEHOW MAGNIFIED TO GARGANTUAN SIZE--THE SWORD OF CONAN THE KING.
THE SHAKEN MERCENARIES ARE AWED UNTO SILENCE, GLIMPSING THE DARK SIDE OF THEIR OWN SOULS, THE BLOODLUST AND SAVAGERY DWELLING DEEP IN THE BREAST OF EVERY FIGHTING AND KILLING MAN.
IT IS A VIEW INTO THE HELL WHICH AWAITS THEM.

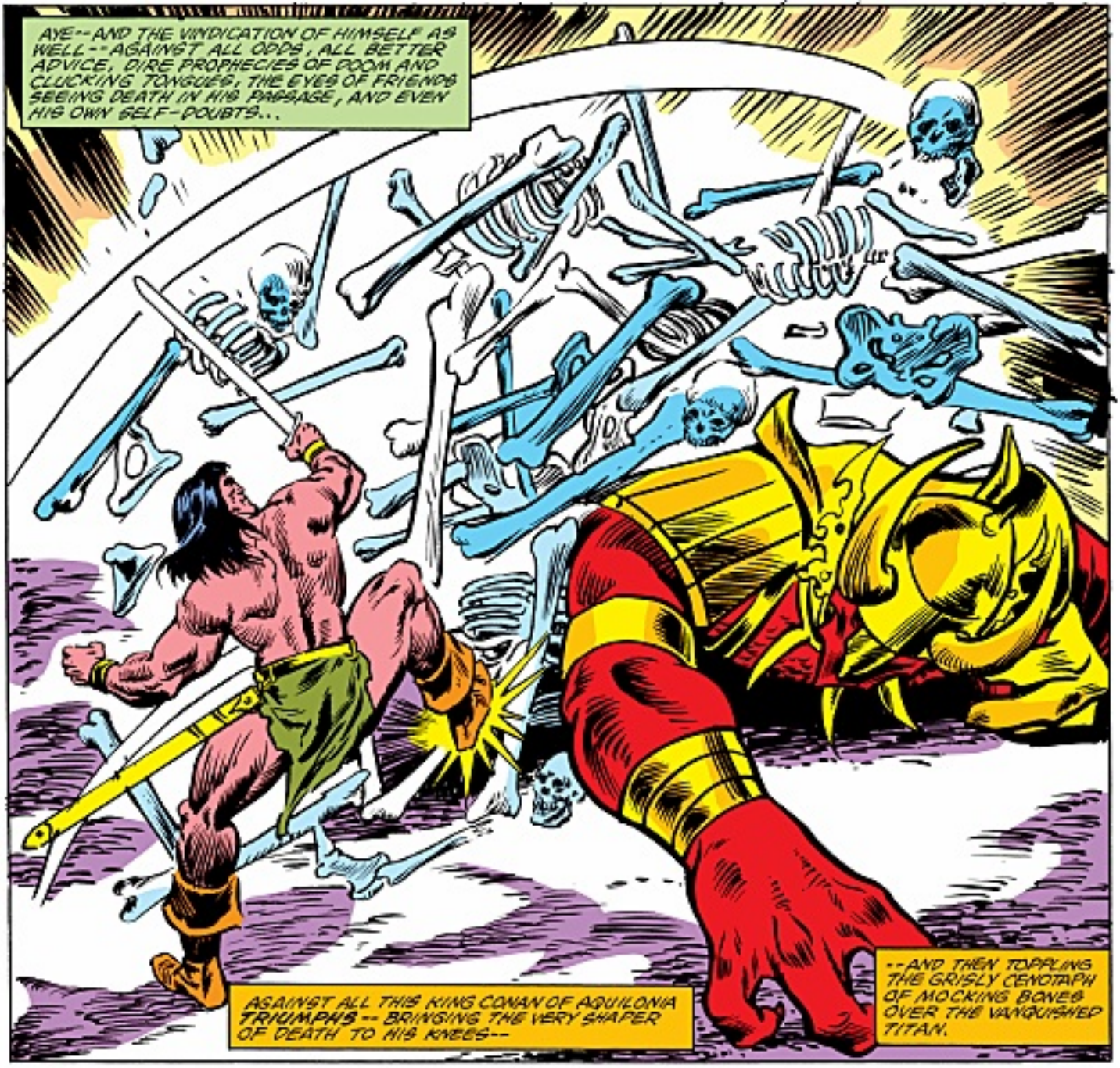
AS FOR CONAN, THOUGH HIS OWN SOUL IS EQUALLY CHILLED, ANGER IS THE EMOTION WHICH HOLDS GREATEST SWAY.
HOWLING HIS HILLMAN'S FURY, HE LEAPS FROM TOMB-TOP STRAIGHT INTO THE LOATHESOME DEATH-SHAPER'S FACE.
MY SWORD, DEMON! YOU HOLD MY STOLEN SWOR--
UHN!
THE DEMON GESTURES AND, LIKE AN IRKSOME GNAT, CONAN IS SWATTED AWAY.
AND IT IS ONLY NOW, LOOKING FROM THE GROUND UP, THAT CONAN REALIZES THE FULL CONSEQUENCES OF HIS UNCONTROLLED RAGE.
MITRA AND ISHTAR--YOU'RE HUGE!
SPARKS FLY AS BLADE MEETS BLADE--
--AND CONAN IS FORCED EVER BACK UNDER THE GIANT'S RELENTLESS ONSLAUGHT.
I SPOKE TOO SOON ABOUT TAURUS' BLADE! AGAINST DEATH-SHAPER--AND MY OWN TRUE SWORD--'TIS USELESS!
I WAS WRONG, AND MY FATHER WAS RIGHT--GOOD STEEL WITH A RAZOR EDGE IT MAY BE... BUT IT'S NOT MINE!
WITH HIS BACK TO THE WALL AND FURTHER RETREAT IMPOSSIBLE--
--CONAN STARES TRUE DEATH IN THE FACE, WITH FINAL CERTAINTY...


AND JUST WHEN HE IS ALMOST RE-SIGNED TO THE DARK TRUTH OF THE DRUID'S PROPHECY--
CYNNERA! BUT HOW--? THE MEDALLION--AROUND HER NECK AGAIN?
THEN, AS I SENSED, THE THING MUST HAVE GREAT POWERS!
INSTANTLY, HE EMPTIES HIS PURSE OF THE OTHER TWO MEDALLIONS, CASTING THEM TO THE DIRT..
...AND WITH THE GRIM DESPERATION OF A MAN WHO HAS NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE, HE SHATTERS ONE WITH A HARD STAMP OF HIS HEEL.


THE DEEP BASS ROAR OF THUNDER ROLLS DOWN THE ARBOR LANE, SHAKING TREES AND STATUES ALIKE, AND SEEMING TO SLAM INTO DEATH-SHAPER HIMSELF.
THE CENOTAPH TWITCHES AS JAGGED CRACKS ERUPT ALONG ITS LENGTH--AND THE TITAN WHOSE DEATH IT MARKS, REELS IN PAIN...
NO!!
THEN, I WAS RIGHT, BY CROM--!


AND AS CONAN CRUSHES THE OTHER TALISMAN--
NOOO!!
--THE PILLAR OF BONES TREMBLES, MIRRORED BY DEATH-SHAPER'S OWN SPASMS--AS IF BOTH ARE LOCKED IN AGONIES OF RAGE.
STOP HIM, MY PET.
SLAY HIM!!

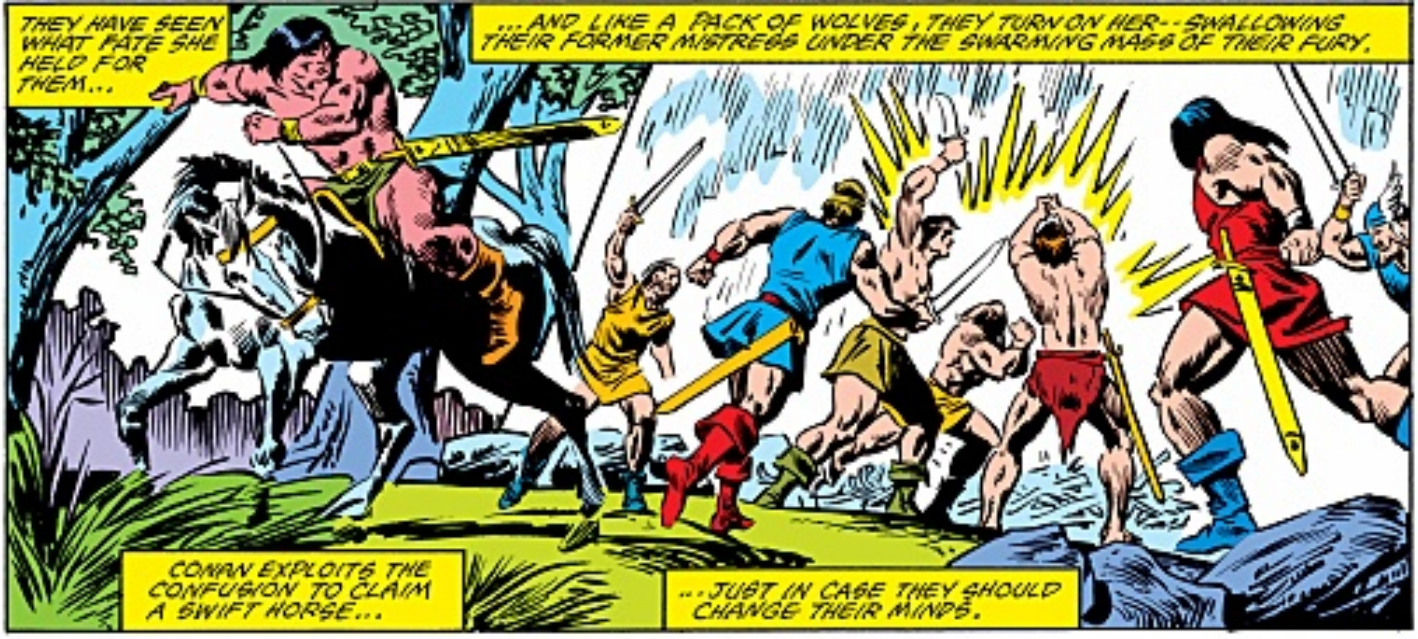
CONAN TURNS HIS BACK, SENSING THAT DEATH-SHAPER HAS BEEN MORTALLY WEAKENED, AND STEELS HIMSELF FOR THE PANTHER'S SPRING...
WHEN IT COMES, HE COLLAPSES TO THE GROUND, ROLLING UNDER THE LUNGING MISSILE OF BUNCHED SINEW--
RAHRR
--SO THAT THE SAVAGE CAT HURTLES ON TO IMPALE ITSELF ON DEATH-SHAPER'S FINAL, AND UNWITTING, DEFENSE.
SHREEEEHHR
EVEN AS IT IS JERKED FROM DEATH-SHAPER'S GRASP, THE SWORD BEGINS TO SHRINK.
AND CONAN DISCARDS THE BLADE OF TAURUS TO FULL HIS OWN FROM THE PANTHER'S BODY. HE REWARDS THE FAMILIAR FEEL BETWEEN HILT AND POMMEL WITH A WOLFISH GRIN.
AND NOW, DEATH-SHAPER... NOW WE SHALL SEE WHOSE BLOOD MISTS THE AIR... AND WHO WILL BE THE FIRST TO DIE!
GOUTS OF FLAME, ECHOING A VISION SEEN ON A HILLSIDE, LEAP AND SPURT FROM EACH FIERCELY DEALT WOUND, AND THE REST IS VINDICATION--
--PROOF OF THE MAGIC FORGED 'TWIXT GOOD STEEL AND HARDENED SINEW...

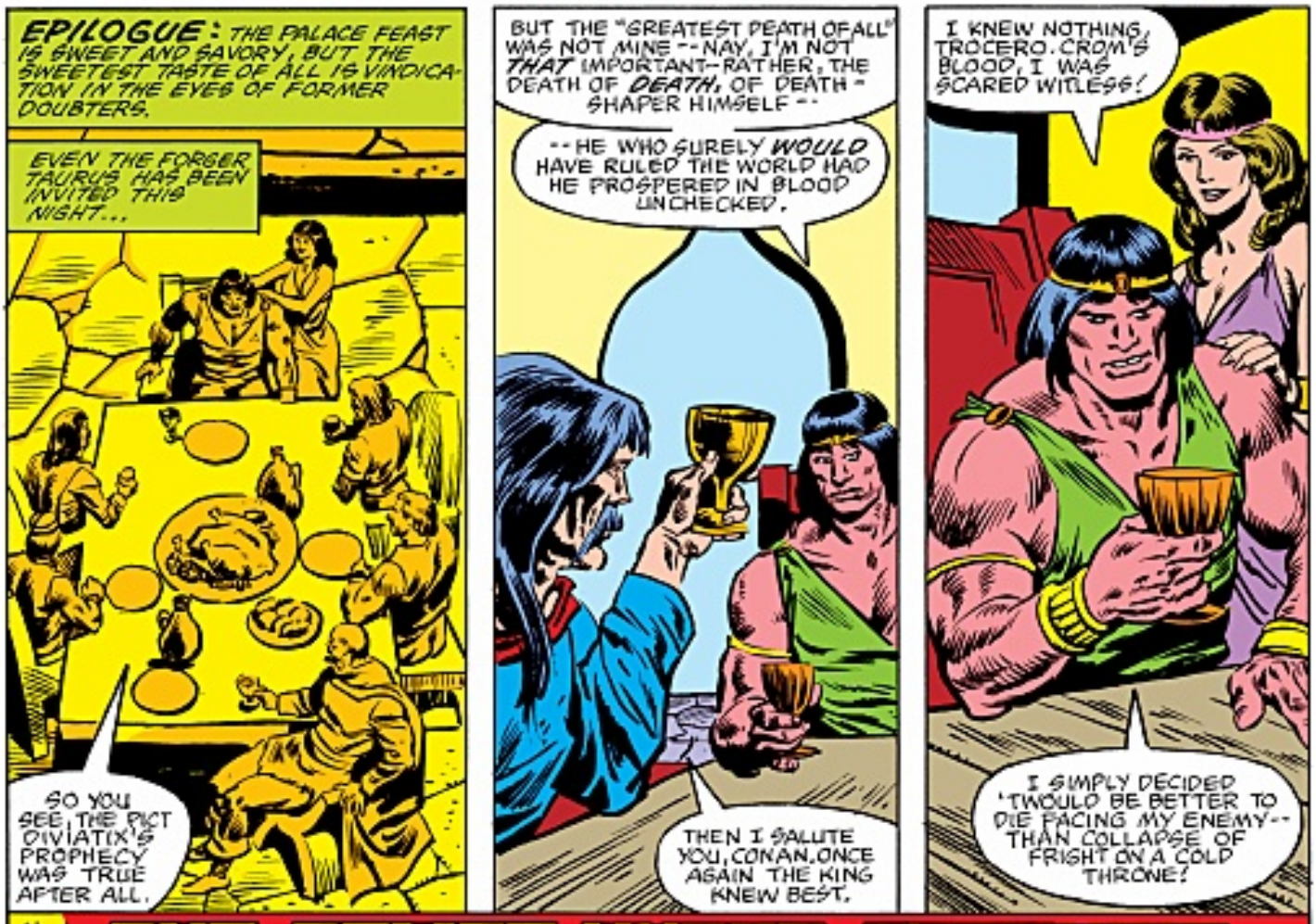

AYE--AND THE VINDICATION OF HIMSELF AS WELL--AGAINST ALL ODDS, ALL BETTER ADVICE, DIRE PROPHECIES OF DOOM AND CLUCKING TONGUES, THE EYES OF FRIENDS SEEING DEATH IN HIS PASSAGE, AND EVEN HIS OWN SELF-DOUBTS...
AGAINST ALL THIS KING CONAN OF AQUILONIA TRIUMPHS -- BRINGING THE VERY SHAPER OF DEATH TO HIS KNEES--
--AND THEN TOPPLING THE GRISLY CENOTAPH OF MOCKING BONES OVER THE VANQUISHED TITAN.

THE THUNDER STILLS, AND IN THE SUDDEN STILLNESS... THE ONLY SOUND IS THE SLOW SIZZLE AND SPUTTER OF DEATH-SHAPER'S FATAL WOUNDS.
NOW... 'TIS A TRUE TOMB.

NO! YOU MEN--YOU'RE MINE! I BOUGHT YOU! DON'T JUST STAND THERE! RUSH HIM--KILL CONAN!
BUT THE MERCENARIES SIMPLY GAPE AT HER...

...AND THEN, WITH EYES AWED BY HIS FEAT, AT CONAN.
CONAN! CONAN! CONAN!
ALLEGIANCE HAS SHIFTED.





NEXT: **THE TOMBS UNDER TARANTIA**

KING CONAN

c/o MARVEL COMICS GROUP
575 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022

LOUISE JONES
EDITOR
DANNY FINGEROTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Louise, et.al.,

Re: KING CONAN #9. Doug's first outing as a King Conan scripter was very successful. Hopefully, he'll be the regular writer. I do have some script suggestions, though. The scene I remember best in the entire run of this title is a court scene with ladies-in-waiting desperate to get a taste of Conan's lurid past — and he only wants to cozy up with his family. This presented a rarely seen facet of Conan's personality. Now doesn't he have children other than Conn... two daughters, I think it was. Conan as the suspicious father of a pretty daughter could make an interesting springboard for a story.

As for the art — what can I say? John Buscema (how is his name pronouced, by the way ?) is, to my mind, a direct descendent of Leonardo and Michaelangelo. If they had ever drawn comics, I can't halp but suppose their work would have looked like John's work here, especially as it is enhanced by Ernie Chan's inking. And Louise does a good job of putting the whole thing together.

Anything else? Oh, yes! How about more insights into the working bureaucracies of Aquilonia, involving trade negotiations, troops levies, judicial systems, etc. We need to see more of the interaction between Conan and his subjects. Also, Zenobia hasn't been in the book much, except as a maguffin. Please highlight her more in the future. I really like KING CONAN, and I have the highest hopes for it in the future.

Keyes Clark
℅ King Arthur's Book Shoppe
2336 James
Bellingham, WA 98225

So do we, Keyes, and we're happy to have you on our side. Your suggestions are well thought out — the sort of thing we like to see — and we'll pass them on to Doug, so he can take them under consideration. By the way, Buscema is pronouced "B'you—seh—muh", with the accent on the second syllable. Who says this isn't the Marvel Age Of Instant Orthoepy?

Dear Louise,

KING CONAN #9 was a thoroughly enjoyable issue. You couldn't have chosen a better writer than Doug Moench for KING CONAN. Anyone who remembers his KULL work in BIZARRE ADVENTURES #26 can see what I mean. Doug seems to handle sword-and-sorcery in a much more exciting manner than most writers, and I hope his work will get even better in the future. As for "The Bones Of The Brown Man," I haven't abeen able to find fault with it. Doug has his own style which makes him perfect for Conan.

It's good to see Conn with a major role. His interactions with Akenak tended slightly to the melodramatic, but that passed away by the climax. By the way, I was surprised to see Conan behaving himself with the Picts. Maybe he's mellowing with age.

I don't have to go into a tirade praising John and Ernie. We all know they're tops. I hope they maintain their high standards, as they have in the past.

Leon P. Zivkovic
224 E. 26th St.
Paterson, NJ 07514

Dear Louise,

So this mag is going bi-monthly, eh? That means even *more* pages of Conan adventures to produce each year. What to do? How do you keep KING CONAN disctinct from the other Conan magazines? Of course, there's Conan's age and his kingship. And there's the longer story length (though you have that in SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN, too).

What's the answer? You need look no further than KING CONAN #9. Concentrate on Conn. *He's* the one really big difference between this mag and other Conan books. First, Conn has a unique meaning in Conan's life. In the other mags, Conan has women he cares for and comrades he trusts, but only here does he have a son, a person that he perhaps hopes to shape into a better version of himself (though he has some influence from his mother — as #9 pointed out — which allows us to see a sort of alternate Conan, a sort of "what if Conan were a bit more even-tempered?"). To me, one of Conan's dramatic drawbacks has been his seeming near-omnipotence and rock-steady countenance. Conn is, in a dramatic sense, a more pliable character. I don't want you to change the title of the book to PRINCE CONN, ALSO FEATURING HIS DAD, but continued emphasis on the young warrior is both hoped and called for.

T.M. Maple
Toronto, Ontario

Don't worry about Conn, T.M. He'll continue to be an important part of KING CONAN — but don't get mad if he isn't in every issue. After all, we do have to deal with other characters, like whatsizname... big guy... King something or other...

Dear Louise,

KING CONAN #9 was magnificent in presenting Prince Conn's first solo adventure, even if Conan had to rescue him. The Brown Man Of The River was very eerie and a great creation on the part of Doug and John. So now, how about showing the fates of various Conan companions, such as Zula, over the years?

John Willis
20 Braddock Pk.
Boston, MA 02116

You can bet you'll see various characters from Conan's past popping up now and then, John. We can't promise where or when, so you'll just have to keep reading. Heh, heh. (Ain't we the sneaky ones?)

Dear Marvel,

I stormed the local magazine store and glared down at KING CONAN #9. As I greedily snatched it from the rack, I wondered who was handling the writing chores now. Lo and behold — Doug Moench.

It was the best Conan tale I have read in some months. Doug does terrific things with this character. Hopefully, you can coerce him into doing an occasional story for SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN.

Buscema and Chan did their usual great job. One thing, though: *Please* put a beard on Conan.

Jon Nuquist
29 Bailey Ave.
Montpelier, VT 05602

You mean just walk up to him and paste one on? Good way to lose your hand, Jon. Really, we do keep Conan clean-shaven to maintain visual continuity between his three magazines... but that doesn't mean a beard — as the Conan novels describe the King having — is out, even if it's just for a short time, like in this issue.

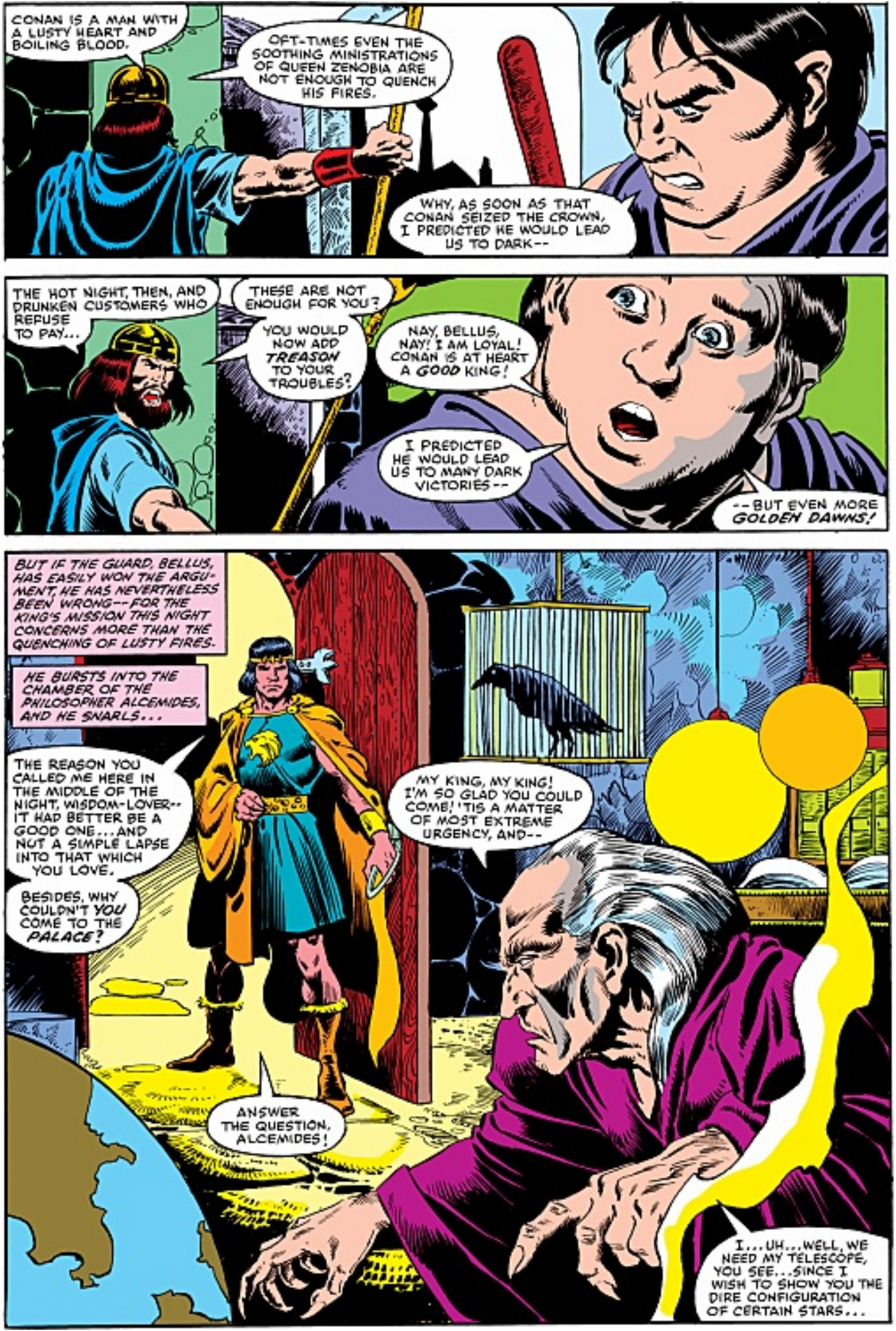
COVER PENCILER: RON FRENZ COVER INKER: RICARDO VILLAMONTE

Stan Lee PRESENTS: KING CONAN

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD

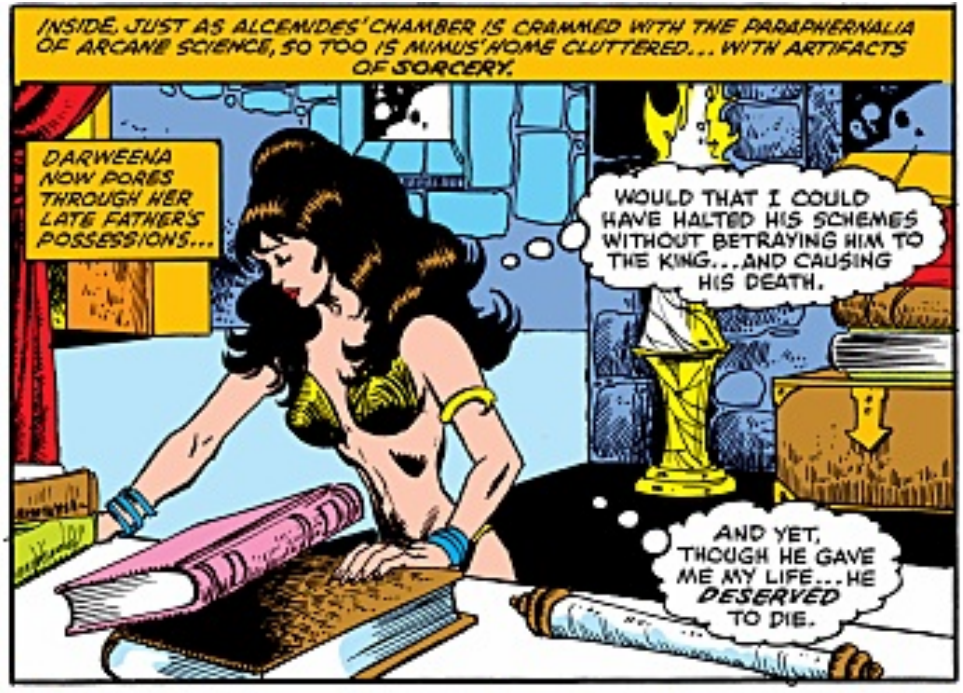
THE TOMBS UNDER TARANTIA

DOUG MOENCH SCRIPT | RON FRENZ BREAKDOWNS | RICARDO VILLAMONTE FINISHES | JOE ROSEN- LETTERS GEORGE ROUSSOS- COLORS | LOUISE JONES EDITOR | JIM SHOOTER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

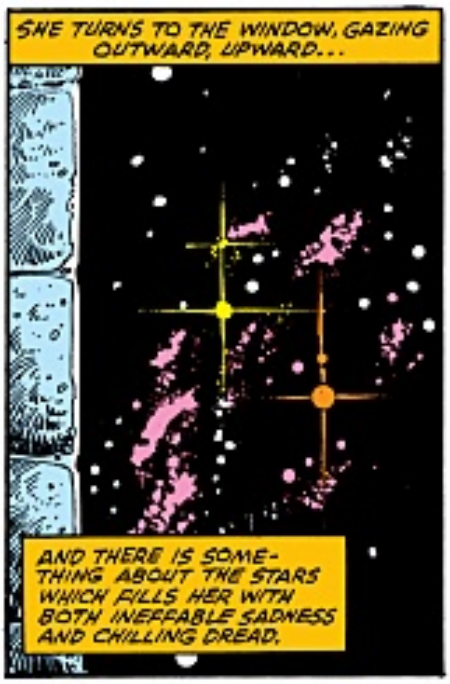

CONAN IS A MAN WITH A LUSTY HEART AND BOILING BLOOD.
OFT-TIMES EVEN THE SOOTHING MINISTRATIONS OF QUEEN ZENOBIA ARE NOT ENOUGH TO QUENCH HIS FIRES.
WHY, AS SOON AS THAT CONAN SEIZED THE CROWN, I PREDICTED HE WOULD LEAD US TO DARK--
THE HOT NIGHT, THEN, AND DRUNKEN CUSTOMERS WHO REFUSE TO PAY...
THESE ARE NOT ENOUGH FOR YOU?
YOU WOULD NOW ADD TREASON TO YOUR TROUBLES?
NAY, BELLUS, NAY! I AM LOYAL! CONAN IS AT HEART A GOOD KING!
I PREDICTED HE WOULD LEAD US TO MANY DARK VICTORIES--
--BUT EVEN MORE GOLDEN DAWNS!
BUT IF THE GUARD, BELLUS, HAS EASILY WON THE ARGUMENT, HE HAS NEVERTHELESS BEEN WRONG--FOR THE KING'S MISSION THIS NIGHT CONCERNS MORE THAN THE QUENCHING OF LUSTY FIRES.
HE BURSTS INTO THE CHAMBER OF THE PHILOSOPHER ALCEMIDES, AND HE SNARLS...
THE REASON YOU CALLED ME HERE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, WISDOM-LOVER--IT HAD BETTER BE A GOOD ONE...AND NOT A SIMPLE LAPSE INTO THAT WHICH YOU LOVE.
BESIDES, WHY COULDN'T YOU COME TO THE PALACE?
MY KING, MY KING! I'M SO GLAD YOU COULD COME! 'TIS A MATTER OF MOST EXTREME URGENCY, AND--
ANSWER THE QUESTION, ALCEMIDES!
I...UH...WELL, WE NEED MY TELESCOPE, YOU SEE...SINCE I WISH TO SHOW YOU THE DIRE CONFIGURATION OF CERTAIN STARS...

THERE IS A SYSTEM OF BELIEF, YOU SEE, WHICH HOLDS THAT MAN'S DESTINY IS GOVERNED BY MOVEMENTS IN THE HEAVENS. DO YOU SEE, MY KING?
AYE...
...AND I SEE NAUGHT BUT TWINKLING STARS, LARGE AND SMALL --THE SAME AS ANY OTHER CLEAR NIGHT.
BUT DO YOU NOT SEE HOW THREE OF THE BRIGHTER STARS ARE NOW CLUSTERED IN AN OMINOUS PATTERN--?
I SEE THEM, BUT--
WAIT--NOW I SEE A FALLING STAR-- STREAKING ACROSS THE FACE OF THE OTHERS...
WHAT?! THEN THIS IS THE WORST SIGN POSSIBLE! THE STARS WERE ALREADY IN DREAD CONJUNCTION, THE WORST IN YEARS, BODING PORTENTS FOR TOMORROW--AND NOW THIS!
ANCIENT EVIL LURKS IN THE VASTNESS BETWEEN STARS, YOU KNOW-- VILE DEMONS...
I THOUGHT THE HEAVENS BELONGED TO THE GODS.
GODS, DEMONS --WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? THEY'RE ALL CRUEL IN THE AFFAIRS OF MEN--THE DEMONS ARE SIMPLY MORE ACTIVE ABOUT IT. HAVE YOU ANYTHING IMPORTANT SCHEDULED FOR TOMORROW--ANYTHING YOU SHOULD FEAR?
ON THE CONTRARY, ALCEMIDES, I HAVE CAUSE FOR REJOICING.
MY SON CONN RETURNS FROM THE BARRACKS, HAVING COMPLETED HIS FIRST TRAINING FOR THE ARMY.
THE WINDOW EXPLODES.
A RAVEN!!
IT FLUTTERS TO CONAN'S FEET.
TWITCHES.
FLOPS.
AND LIES STILL.

NOT FAR FROM ALCEMIDES' ABODE...
--THERE STANDS THE HOME OF THE SORCERER MIMUS, RECENTLY SLAIN BY CONAN.*
*SEE KING CONAN™ 10. -- LOUISE.


INSIDE, JUST AS ALCEMIDES' CHAMBER IS CRAMMED WITH THE PARAPHERNALIA OF ARCANE SCIENCE, SO TOO IS MIMUS' HOME CLUTTERED... WITH ARTIFACTS OF SORCERY.
DARWEENA NOW PORES THROUGH HER LATE FATHER'S POSSESSIONS...
WOULD THAT I COULD HAVE HALTED HIS SCHEMES WITHOUT BETRAYING HIM TO THE KING...AND CAUSING HIS DEATH.
AND YET, THOUGH HE GAVE ME MY LIFE...HE DESERVED TO DIE.

BEST, NOW, TO RID MYSELF OF ALL HIS BOOKS AND FETISHES...
BEST TO SIMPLY BANISH HIM FROM MEMORY.
BUT THEN, DARWEENA'S EYES ARE CAUGHT BY A VIEW OF THE NIGHTED HEAVENS...


SHE TURNS TO THE WINDOW, GAZING OUTWARD, UPWARD...
AND THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THE STARS WHICH FILLS HER WITH BOTH INEFFABLE SADNESS AND CHILLING DREAD.

IT REQUIRES CONSCIOUS EFFORT TO TURN FROM THE WINDOW, HER SOFT WHITE SKIN STIPPLED WITH GOOSE-FLESH...
YES--BEST TO DESTROY EVERYTHING AT ONCE.

BUT AGAIN SHE PAUSES, HER EYES THIS TIME DRAWN TO THE SHIMMERING PLAY OF STARLIGHT ON A BURNISHED BOX.
SHE HAS SEEN THE SMALL CASK MANY TIMES BEFORE...
...BUT IT HAS NEVER LOOKED LIKE THIS.

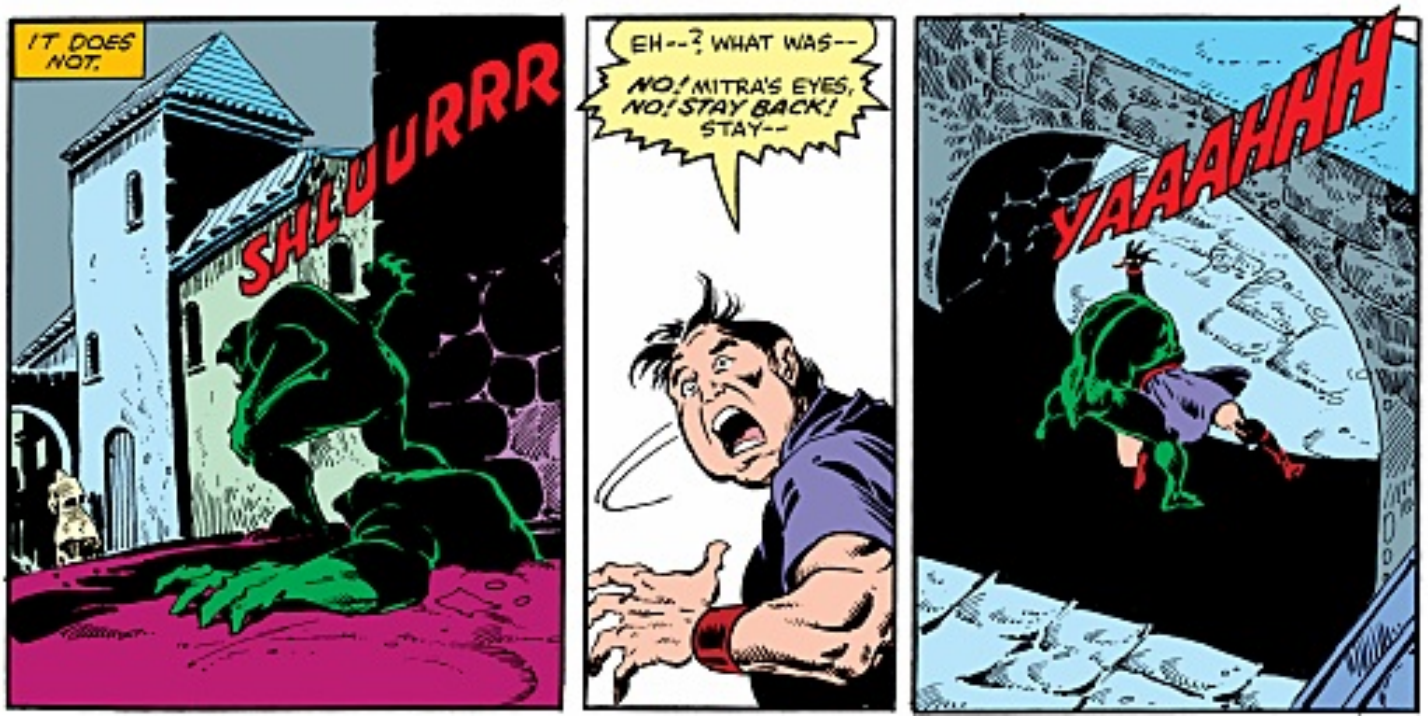
AGAINST HER BETTER JUDGMENT, AND OPENLY TREMBLING NOW, SHE FEELS COMPELLED TO DO SOMETHING WITH THE ORNATE BOX...
...TO... TO OPEN IT...

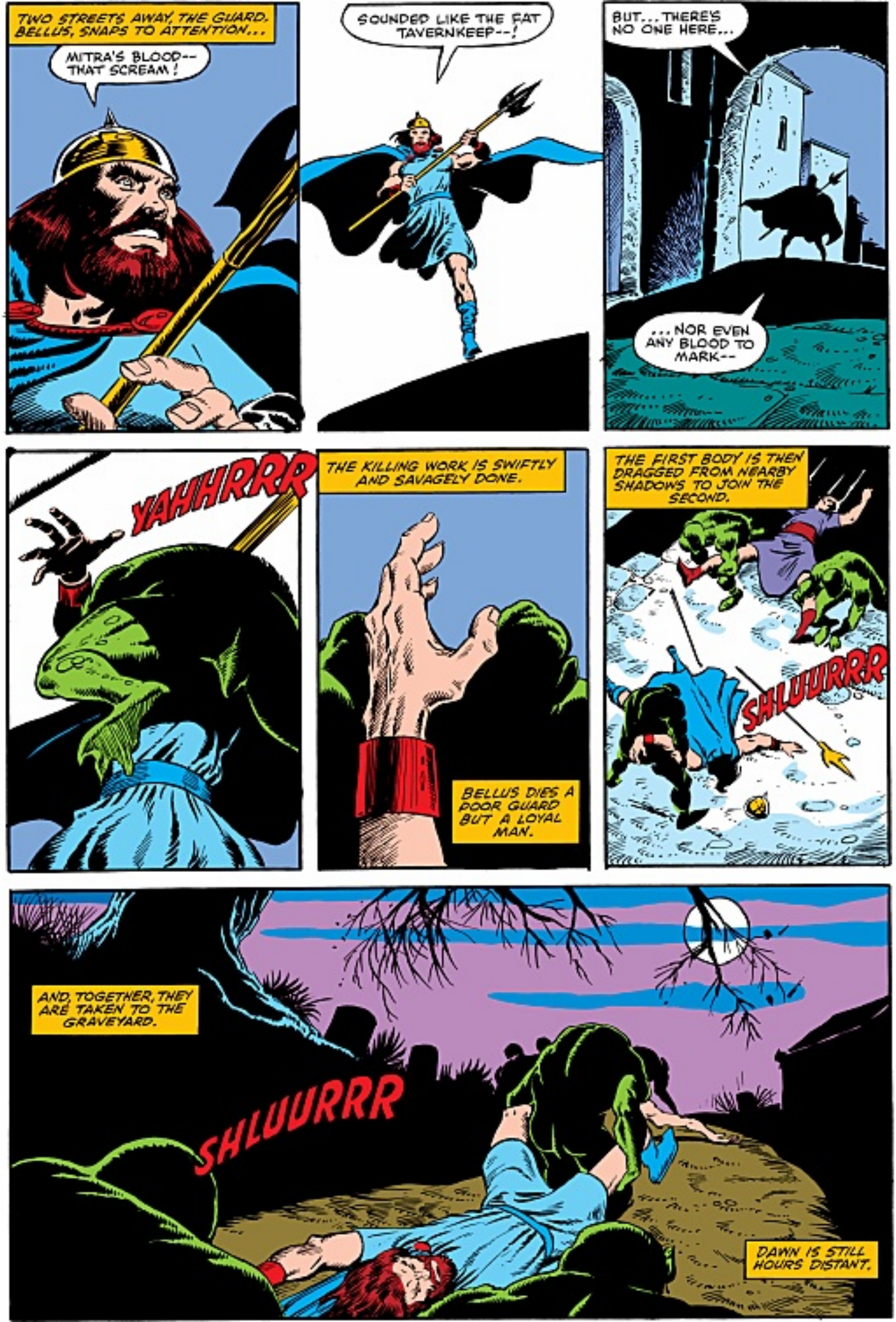
...AND HER SCREAM IS INSTANTLY SMOTHERED.

HARSH LIGHT DAZZLES FROM THE CASK--AND THEN A SONOROUS, STENTORIAN VOICE, LIKE TALONS SCRAPING TOMBSTONE...
DO NOT STRUGGLE, DAUGHTER DARWEENA. THE MASK BINDS YOUR MIND AS WELL AS YOUR FACE.
IT IS THE VOICE OF HER FATHER--DEAD MIMUS.
I AM BUT A VISION--A SPELL--LEFT BEHIND BY MY CORPOREAL FORM BEFORE MY DEATH.
AND I SHALL FADE SOON, THE SPELL BEING A SEVERELY LIMITED ONE--IMPOSSIBLE FOR MOST MAGES TO CONJURE AT ALL...
...BUT I WILL NOT FADE BEFORE FIRST SETTING IN MOTION THE SEEDS OF MY VENGEANCE.
I PLANT THOSE SEEDS IN YOUR MIND NOW.
THE GRUESOME MASK SEETHES WITH INNER FIRE.
...THEN BLASTS APART IN WISPY SHREDS...
...LEAVING DARWEENA'S FACE BARE BUT BLANK.
WHAT IS IT YOU DESIRE, MY FATHER?
SIMPLY GO, MY BEAUTIFUL AND TREACHEROUS DAUGHTER...
GO--AND OBEY THE COMMANDS I HAVE SEEDED IN YOUR MIND.
YES, FATHER. I SHALL NOT FAIL.

AND, IN A FADING RUMBLE OF LAUGHTER, THE APPARITION OF MIMUS DISSOLVES FOREVER...
...SECURE IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT HIS DEATH WILL NOW BE AVENGED.
SOMNAMBULANT, DARWEENA LEAVES THE HOUSE, CLOAKED IN HEAVY CRIMSON.
SHE GLIDES THROUGH THE DARK HOT NIGHT, OBLIVIOUS TO ITCH OF CLOAK, TICKLE OF SWEAT.
SHE DISAPPEARS, FINALLY, INTO A GRAVEYARD, MANTLED IN SHADOW AND MOONLIGHT...
...A GRAVEYARD WHERE SHE WILL ...DO THINGS.

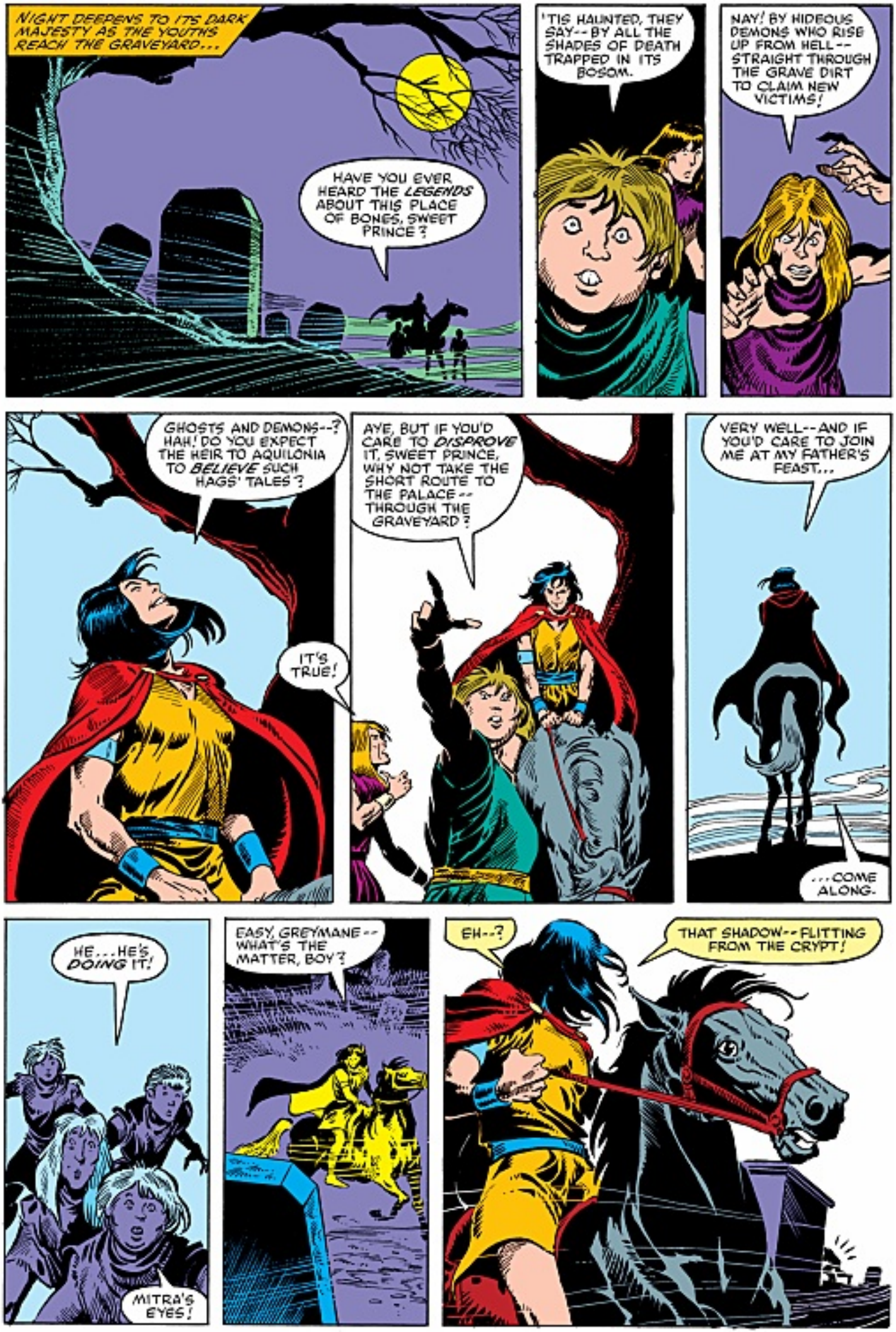
AN HOUR LATER, THE TAVERN-KEEP'S TOIL IS FINALLY DONE--THE DISHES WASHED, THE FLOORS SWEPT, AND THE CRATES OF EMPTY BOTTLES AND FLASKS HAULED TO THE ALLEY...
ISHTAR CURSE THAT DOG, BELLUS, FOR TREATING ME LIKE THAT--ONLY STANDS TO REASON HE'D BE LOYAL TO A HEATHEN KING!
FINALLY, UNDER THE LIGHT OF THREE CURIOUSLY ALIGNED STARS, HE CAN LOCK UP AND GO HOME...
...IF THAT IS, FATE SO DECREES.

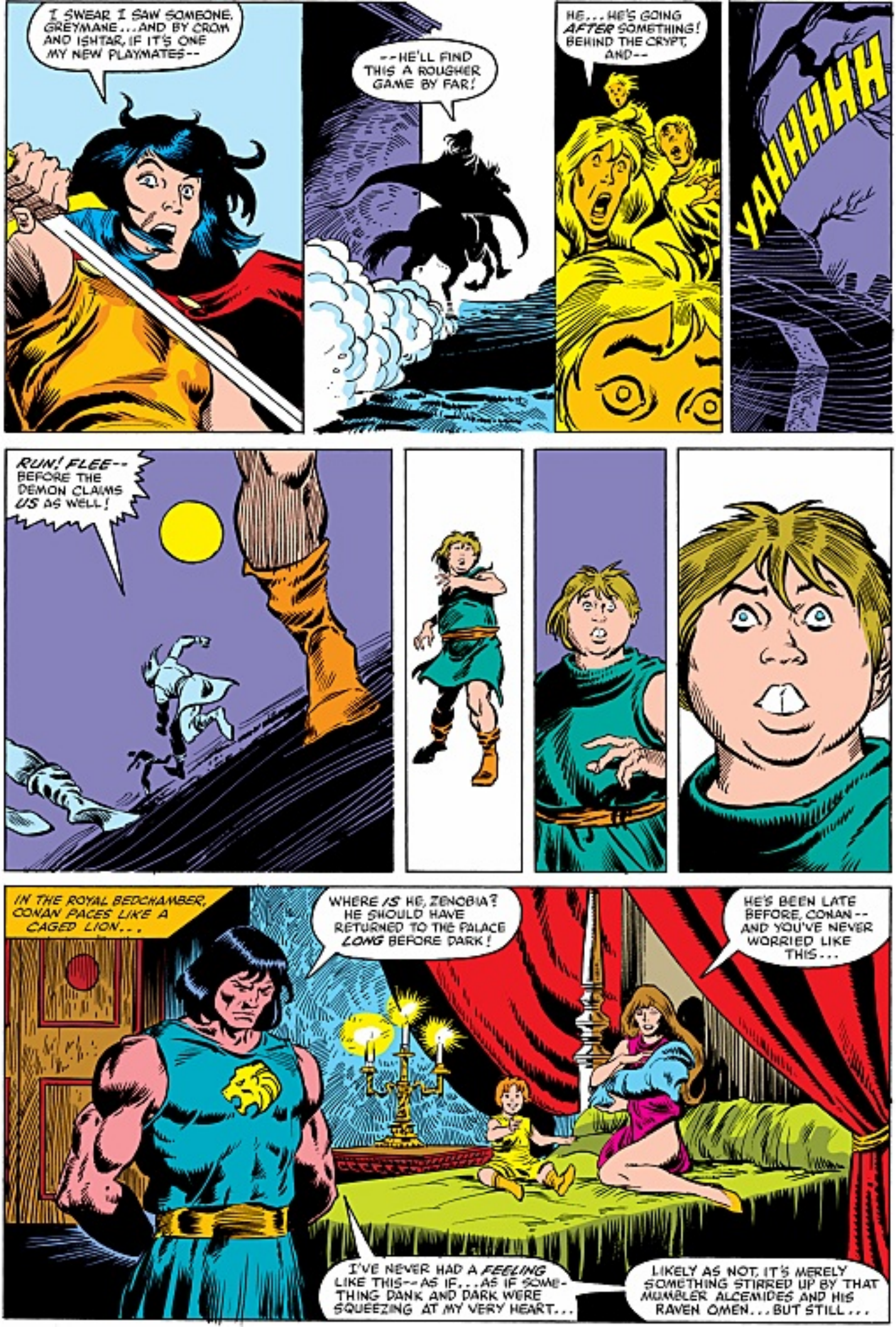

IT DOES NOT.
SHLUURRR
EH--? WHAT WAS--
NO! MITRA'S EYES, NO! STAY BACK! STAY--
YAAAHHH


TWO STREETS AWAY, THE GUARD, BELLUS, SNAPS TO ATTENTION...
MITRA'S BLOOD-- THAT SCREAM!
SOUNDED LIKE THE FAT TAVERNKEEP--!
BUT... THERE'S NO ONE HERE...
...NOR EVEN ANY BLOOD TO MARK--
YAHHRRR
THE KILLING WORK IS SWIFTLY AND SAVAGELY DONE.
BELLUS DIES A POOR GUARD BUT A LOYAL MAN.
THE FIRST BODY IS THEN DRAGGED FROM NEARBY SHADOWS TO JOIN THE SECOND.
SHLUURRR
AND, TOGETHER, THEY ARE TAKEN TO THE GRAVEYARD.
SHLUURRR
DAWN IS STILL HOURS DISTANT.

DAWN...
IT WAS A LONG RIDE BACK TO THE CITY, CONN...
AYE, BUT AT LEAST THE NIGHT WAS WARM AND THE STARS BRIGHT--AND WORTH IT TO GET BACK TO TARANTIA.
YOUR FATHER WILL BE PROUD, LAD--YOU'VE DONE WELL IN YOUR TRAINING.
WITH YOU AS MY SWORD-TUTOR, HOW COULD I FAIL?
BUT I AM ANXIOUS TO SEE MY FATHER, AND MY MOTHER AS WELL--I'LL BE FINE FROM HERE.
I DON'T KNOW, CONN... YOUR FATHER ENTRUSTED ME WITH YOUR SAFETY...
I THINK I'D BEST ESCORT YOU TO THE PALACE GATES.
I CAN FIND MY OWN WAY THROUGH THE CITY, TUTOR! BESIDES, IF MY TRAINING WENT SO WELL, SHOULD I NOT BE CAPABLE OF TAKING CARE OF MYSELF IN OUR VERY CAPITAL--?
WHAT COULD HAPPEN HERE IN TARANTIA THAT A NEWLY TOUGHENED SOLDIER COULD NOT HANDLE?
VERY WELL, CONN, BUT HAVE A CARE--YOU HEAR ME, LAD?
DON'T WORRY, TUTOR--I'M NEARLY A FULL-GROWN MAN NOW.
BUT, STILL A BOY AT HEART FOR ALL HIS BLUSTER, CONN SOON REINS UP IN A MORE SQUALID SECTOR OF THE CITY...
...ATTRACTED BY THE BOISTEROUS SOUNDS OF ROUGH PLAY...

LOOK THERE...
AYE -- WHO'S THIS ON THE FANCY STEED?
I AM NAMED CONN, SON OF CONAN.
WELL, WELL -- THE KING'S BABE, EH? AND COVETING OUR GAME OF BALL, NO LESS...
THAT'S A LAUGH! THE PAMPERED PRINCE PLAYING WITH GUTTER-URCHINS LIKE US?
HAH! HE'D STAIN HIS FINE CLOAK -- MAYHAP EVEN BRUISE HIS LITTLE NOSE!
I'LL PLAY.
AND I'LL WIN.
AND PLAY THE PRINCE DOES, STRIVING WITH AN INTENSITY WHICH AMAZES THE OTHER YOUTHS --
--AND WHICH PUTS EVEN CONN'S RECENT TRAINING EFFORTS TO SHAME.
AND FINALLY, WHEN THE LONG DAY'S GAME IS DONE...
HE... HE WON!
...IT IS NIGHTFALL.
THE WHOLE DAY--?! WE... WE PLAYED ALL DAY LONG?!
HIS STOMACH RUMBLES.
I'VE GOT TO GET TO THE PALACE!
NO DOUBT, SWEET PRINCE -- FOR A FEAST OF BOAR OR VENISON KEPT WARM BY YOUR FATHER, EH?
ENOUGH! THE WAY HE PLAYED, HE'S EARNED OUR RESPECT.
AYE, THAT HE HAS -- AND SINCE WE'RE GOING THE SAME WAY, WE'LL WALK ALONG.

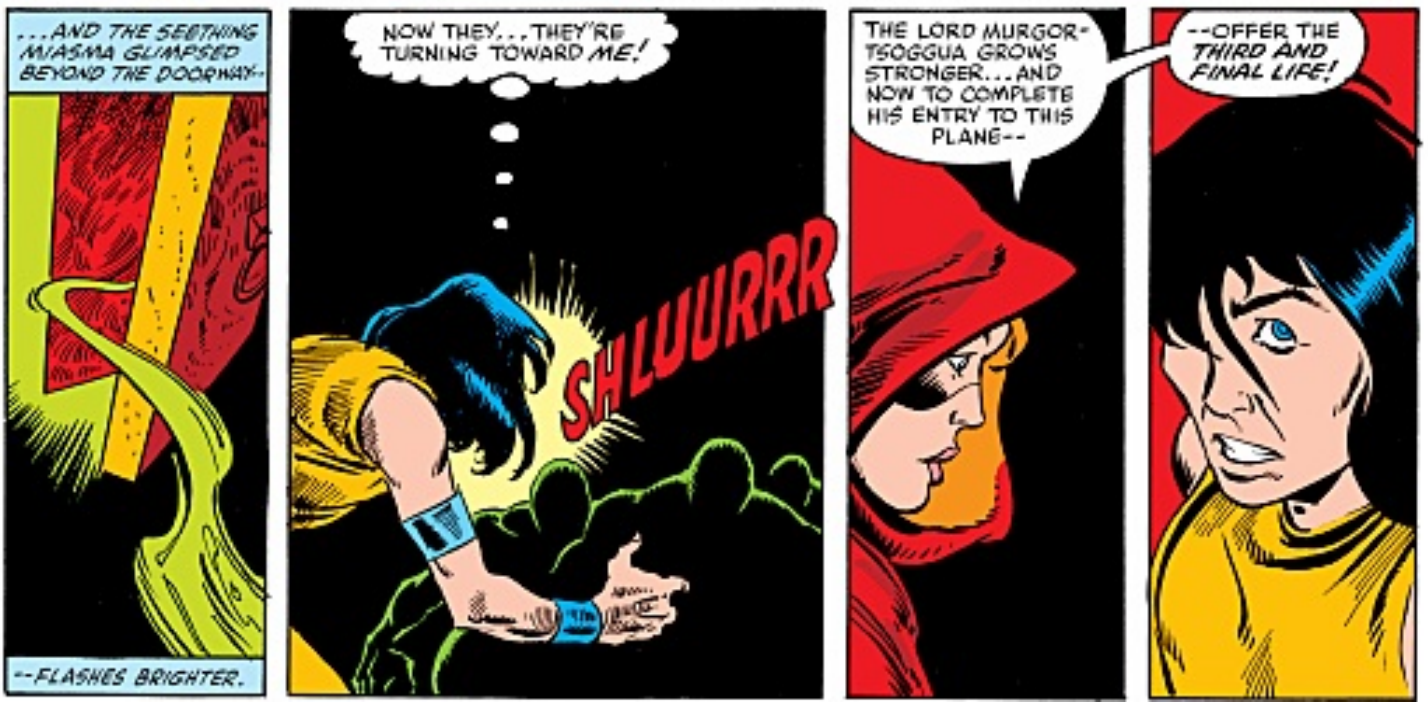

NIGHT DEEPENS TO ITS DARK MAJESTY AS THE YOUTHS REACH THE GRAVEYARD...
HAVE YOU EVER HEARD THE LEGENDS ABOUT THIS PLACE OF BONES, SWEET PRINCE?
'TIS HAUNTED, THEY SAY-- BY ALL THE SHADES OF DEATH TRAPPED IN ITS BOSOM.
NAY! BY HIDEOUS DEMONS WHO RISE UP FROM HELL-- STRAIGHT THROUGH THE GRAVE DIRT TO CLAIM NEW VICTIMS!
GHOSTS AND DEMONS--? HAH! DO YOU EXPECT THE HEIR TO AQUILONIA TO BELIEVE SUCH HAGS' TALES?
IT'S TRUE!
AYE, BUT IF YOU'D CARE TO DISPROVE IT, SWEET PRINCE, WHY NOT TAKE THE SHORT ROUTE TO THE PALACE-- THROUGH THE GRAVEYARD?
VERY WELL--AND IF YOU'D CARE TO JOIN ME AT MY FATHER'S FEAST...
...COME ALONG.
HE...HE'S DOING IT!
MITRA'S EYES!
EASY, GREYMANE-- WHAT'S THE MATTER, BOY?
EH--?
THAT SHADOW--FLITTING FROM THE CRYPT!


I SWEAR I SAW SOMEONE, GREYMANE...AND BY CROM AND ISHTAR, IF IT'S ONE MY NEW PLAYMATES--
--HE'LL FIND THIS A ROUGHER GAME BY FAR!
HE...HE'S GOING AFTER SOMETHING! BEHIND THE CRYPT, AND--
YAHHHHH
RUN! FLEE-- BEFORE THE DEMON CLAIMS US AS WELL!
IN THE ROYAL BEDCHAMBER, CONAN PACES LIKE A CAGED LION...
WHERE IS HE, ZENOBIA? HE SHOULD HAVE RETURNED TO THE PALACE LONG BEFORE DARK!
HE'S BEEN LATE BEFORE, CONAN-- AND YOU'VE NEVER WORRIED LIKE THIS...
I'VE NEVER HAD A FEELING LIKE THIS--AS IF...AS IF SOMETHING DANK AND DARK WERE SQUEEZING AT MY VERY HEART...
LIKELY AS NOT, IT'S MERELY SOMETHING STIRRED UP BY THAT MUMBLER ALCEMIDES AND HIS RAVEN OMEN...BUT STILL...

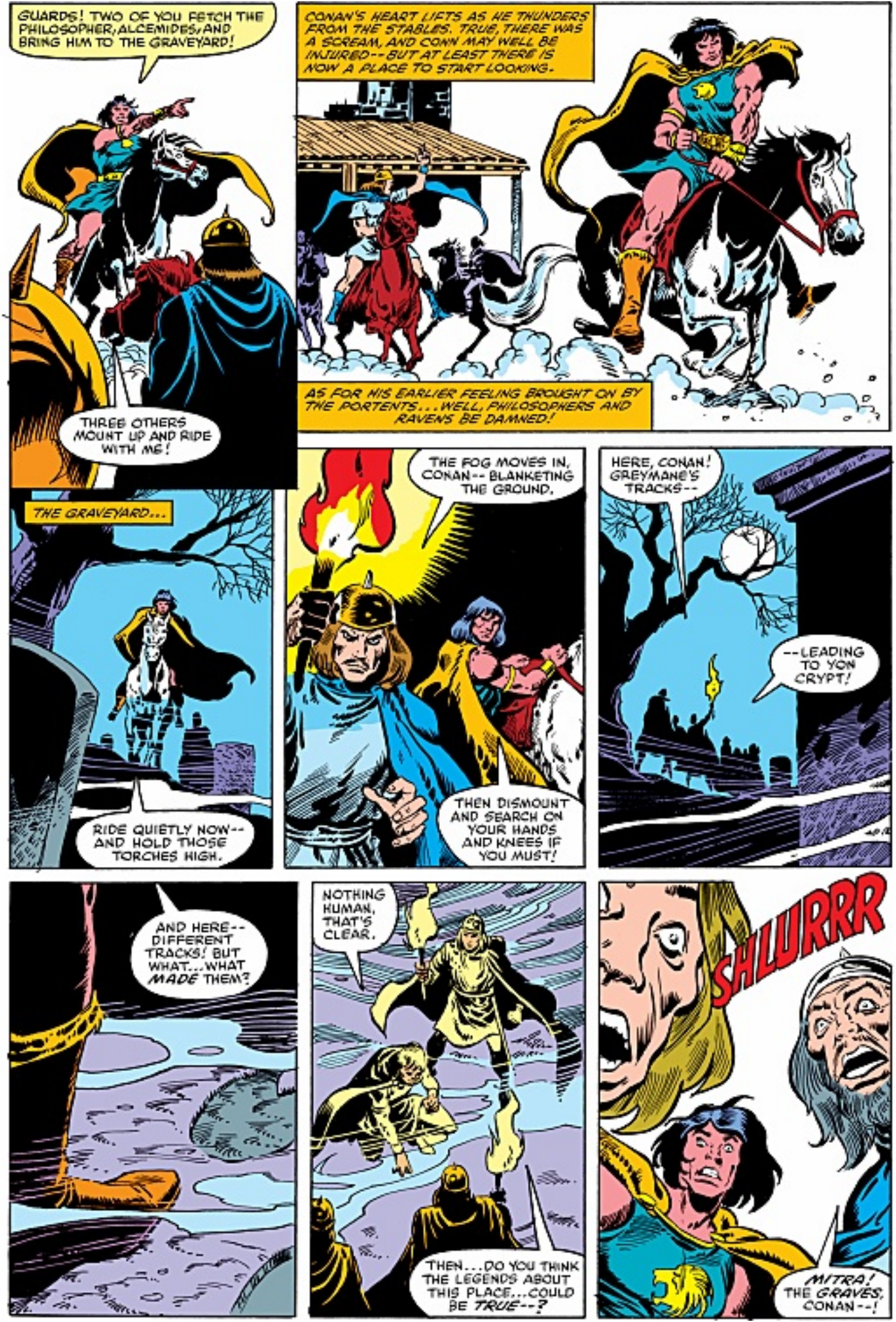
MY KING! I WOULD NOT DISTURB YOU LIKE THIS, BUT--
IS IT ABOUT CONN?! SPEAK, MAN-- 'ERE I TEAR THE WORDS FROM YOUR THROAT!
HIS HORSE, CONAN! IT RETURNED TO THE STABLE... ALONE.
THE KING'S STEEL-BLUE EYES DARKEN UNDER LOWERED BROWS...
I KNEW IT, ZENOBIA--I FELT IT IN MY VERY SOUL..
GREYMANE IS A GOOD MOUNT-- HE'D NEVER RETURN WITHOUT CONN, UNLESS...
DON'T SAY IT, CONAN!
JUST FIND HIM-- FIND OUR SON!
AYE, WIFE, THAT I'LL DO-- E'EN SHOULD ALL THE DEMONS OF HELL STAND IN MY PATH!
BLACKNESS...AND A DIZZY SENSE OF FLOATING. CONN BLINKS HIS EYES...
THE VERTIGO ABATES, BUT BLACKNESS REMAINS...
...SAVE FOR ONE GLOWING ITEM PIERCING THE VOID.
A DOOR...BUT WITHOUT A WALL...!
SHLUURRR
WHAT IN THE NAME OF CROM--? THEY'RE DRAGGING SOMETHING... A MAN!
THE TAVERNKEEP, GROANING SOFTLY.

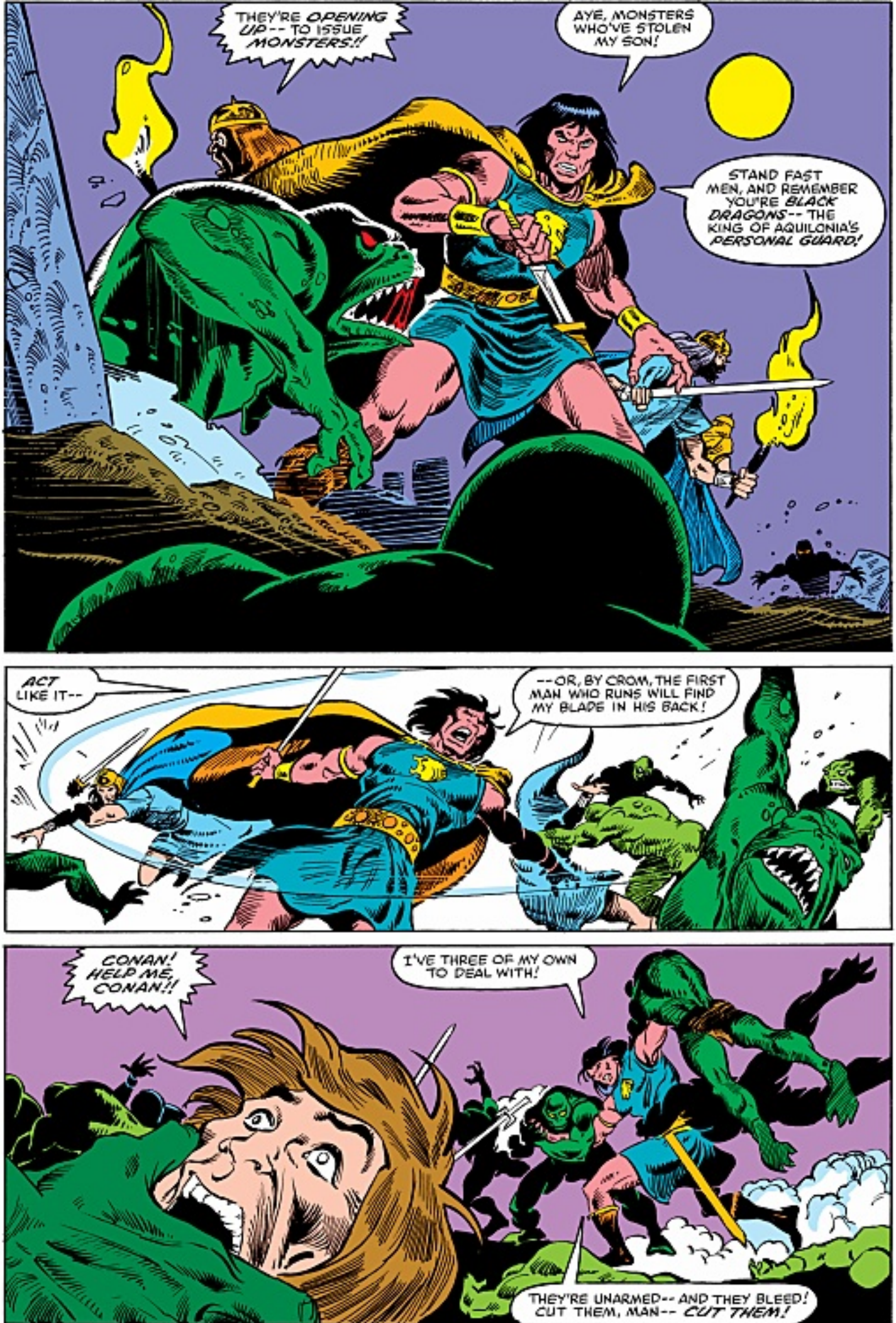
"NOW THEY...THEY'RE OPENING THE DOOR...AND THE STENCH--IT'S VILE!"
SOMETHING'S COMING OUT--!
SOME SORT OF...MIASMA --TOUCHING HIM...
...WRAPPING AROUND HIM, AND--
NO! IT SWALLOWED HIM--MADE HIM DISAPPEAR!!

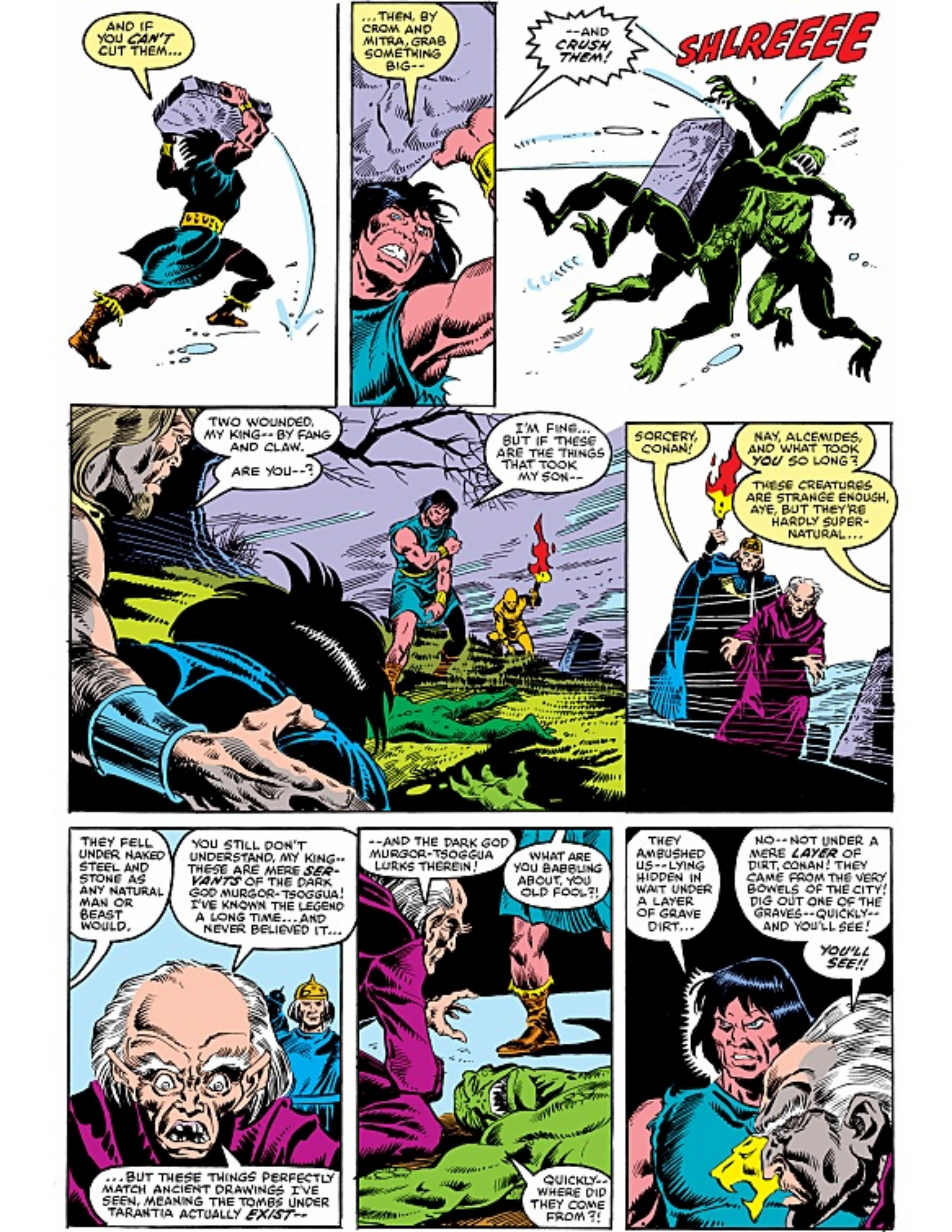
THE LORD OF THE VAST SPACE BETWEEN THE STARS HAS TASTED FIRST LIFE.
EH?-? A WOMAN'S VOICE!
BUT SHE... SHE SEEMS TO BE IN A TRANCE...
NOW, SERVANTS OF MURGOR-TSOGGUA --OFFER THE SECOND LIFE.
AS FATE WOULD HAVE IT, THE GUARD BELLUS IS NOT QUITE DEAD AFTER ALL...
N-NO!
NOOOOO
BUT NOW, SLITHERING LIKE ANIMATED MIST, THE FETID TENDRILS RECTIFY FATE'S CRUEL LAPSE...


...AND THE SEETHING MIASMA GLIMPSED BEYOND THE DOORWAY--
--FLASHES BRIGHTER.
NOW THEY...THEY'RE TURNING TOWARD ME!
SHLUURRR
THE LORD MURGOR-TSOGGUA GROWS STRONGER...AND NOW TO COMPLETE HIS ENTRY TO THIS PLANE--
--OFFER THE THIRD AND FINAL LIFE!

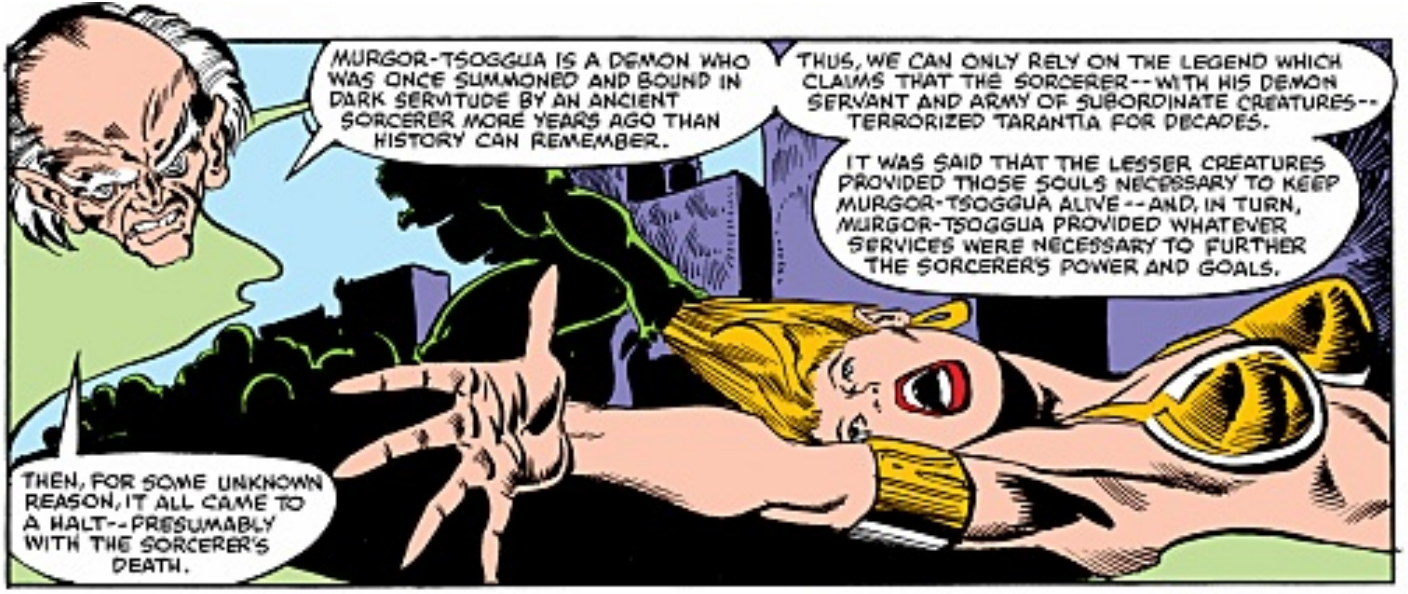
IN THE PALACE STABLES, CONAN VAULTS ONTO HIS STEED...
OPEN THE GATES!
BUT, WHEELING HIS MOUNT--
--HE SPIES THE SHIFT OF A SHADOW WITHOUT.
CROM'S BLOOD! DEVILTRY BEFORE I EVEN LEAVE THE PALACE?!
WHO GOES THERE?!
NOTHING, SAVE THE SOFT SOUND OF STEALTHY MOVEMENT.
ANSWER ME, BY CROM, OR I'LL--
I-IT'S ONLY... M-ME, MY KING...
J-JUST A... GUTTER-URCHIN.
I CAME ABOUT YOUR SON-- THE PRINCE...
YOU'VE SEEN CONN? WHERE?!
WE P-PLAYED A GAME TOGETHER-- AND THEN, WHEN WE PASSED THE GRAVEYARD, WE... UH, CONN DECIDED TO RIDE THROUGH IT-- AND THERE WAS A SCREAM...
CONN'S SCREAM?
Y-YES... I THINK SO-- AND THE OTHERS RAN, BUT I...
WELL, I JUST HAD TO DO SOMETHING.
GOOD LAD. ONE OF MY MEN WILL ESCORT YOU HOME.
NOW-- WHICH GRAVEYARD?
THE ONE DUE NORTH, MY KING.


GUARDS! TWO OF YOU FETCH THE PHILOSOPHER, ALCEMIDES, AND BRING HIM TO THE GRAVEYARD!
THREE OTHERS MOUNT UP AND RIDE WITH ME!
CONAN'S HEART LIFTS AS HE THUNDERS FROM THE STABLES. TRUE, THERE WAS A SCREAM, AND CONN MAY WELL BE INJURED--BUT AT LEAST THERE IS NOW A PLACE TO START LOOKING.
AS FOR HIS EARLIER FEELING BROUGHT ON BY THE PORTENTS...WELL, PHILOSOPHERS AND RAVENS BE DAMNED!
THE GRAVEYARD...
RIDE QUIETLY NOW--AND HOLD THOSE TORCHES HIGH.
THE FOG MOVES IN, CONAN--BLANKETING THE GROUND.
THEN DISMOUNT AND SEARCH ON YOUR HANDS AND KNEES IF YOU MUST!
HERE, CONAN! GREYMANE'S TRACKS--
--LEADING TO YON CRYPT!
AND HERE--DIFFERENT TRACKS! BUT WHAT...WHAT *MADE* THEM?
NOTHING HUMAN, THAT'S CLEAR.
THEN...DO YOU THINK THE LEGENDS ABOUT THIS PLACE...COULD BE *TRUE*--?
SHLURRR
MITRA! THE *GRAVES*, CONAN--!


THEY'RE OPENING UP -- TO ISSUE MONSTERS!!
AYE, MONSTERS WHO'VE STOLEN MY SON!
STAND FAST MEN, AND REMEMBER YOU'RE BLACK DRAGONS -- THE KING OF AQUILONIA'S PERSONAL GUARD!
ACT LIKE IT--
--OR, BY CROM, THE FIRST MAN WHO RUNS WILL FIND MY BLADE IN HIS BACK!
CONAN! HELP ME, CONAN!!
I'VE THREE OF MY OWN TO DEAL WITH!
THEY'RE UNARMED -- AND THEY BLEED! CUT THEM, MAN -- CUT THEM!


AND IF YOU CAN'T CUT THEM...
...THEN, BY CROM AND MITRA, GRAB SOMETHING BIG--
--AND CRUSH THEM!
SHLREEEE
TWO WOUNDED, MY KING-- BY FANG AND CLAW.
ARE YOU--?
I'M FINE... BUT IF THESE ARE THE THINGS THAT TOOK MY SON--
SORCERY, CONAN!
NAY, ALCEMIDES, AND WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG?
THESE CREATURES ARE STRANGE ENOUGH, AYE, BUT THEY'RE HARDLY SUPER-NATURAL...
THEY FELL UNDER NAKED STEEL AND STONE AS ANY NATURAL MAN OR BEAST WOULD.
YOU STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND, MY KING-- THESE ARE MERE SERVANTS OF THE DARK GOD MURGOR-TSOGGUA! I'VE KNOWN THE LEGEND A LONG TIME... AND NEVER BELIEVED IT...
...BUT THESE THINGS PERFECTLY MATCH ANCIENT DRAWINGS I'VE SEEN, MEANING THE TOMBS UNDER TARANTIA ACTUALLY EXIST--
--AND THE DARK GOD MURGOR-TSOGGUA LURKS THEREIN!
WHAT ARE YOU BABBLING ABOUT, YOU OLD FOOL?!
QUICKLY-- WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?!
THEY AMBUSHED US-- LYING HIDDEN IN WAIT UNDER A LAYER OF GRAVE DIRT...
NO-- NOT UNDER A MERE LAYER OF DIRT, CONAN! THEY CAME FROM THE VERY BOWELS OF THE CITY! DIG OUT ONE OF THE GRAVES-- QUICKLY-- AND YOU'LL SEE!
YOU'LL SEE!!

AND SO, LONG HOURS PASS UNDER A COLD MOON WHICH HAUNTS DISTANT WOLVES AND JACKALS ALIKE, INSPIRING CRIES TO CHILL THE BLOOD...
MITRA AND ISHTAR! ARE THOSE SHOVELS SO DULL THAT YOU CAN'T--
THE CASKET, MY KING-- WE'VE HIT IT!
THEN WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR, MAN?
OPEN IT-- SO WE CAN SEE IF THIS MUMBLER ALCEMIDES HAS BEEN WASTING OUR TIME WHILE MY SON--
'TIS EMPTY, CONAN-- NOT EVEN A SINGLE BONE!
AND THERE'S A HOLE IN THE BOTTOM, WITH THE SPLINTERS EXTENDING UP--AS IF IT WERE SHATTERED FROM BELOW!
IT WAS... BY FIENDS HUNGRY TO FEED. YOU'LL FIND EVERY CASKET IN THIS GRAVEYARD EMPTY--AND UNDER EVERY SHATTERED CASK YOU'LL FIND A TUNNEL LEADING DOWN TO THEIR HAUNT...
...THE TOMB OF THE DEMON MURGOR-TSOGGUA!
BY CROM, THERE IS A TUNNEL UNDER THE CASK-- AND MAYHAP IT LEADS TO WHERE THEY'VE TAKEN CONN!
BRING TORCHES! WE GO DOWN AT ONCE!
MY KING, IF THERE BE MORE OF THOSE CREATURES DOWN HERE, ARE YOU CERTAIN WE SHOULD--
I'M CERTAIN MY SON IS IN PERIL! NOW BE SILENT AND FOLLOW ME--
--EVEN SHOULD I LEAD YOU STRAIGHT TO HELL!
AND WHAT OF YOUR FEARS, ALCEMIDES?
I AM OLD, CONAN, AND I HAVE ALREADY SEEN ENOUGH THINGS TO INSPIRE THE FEAR OF THREE LIFETIMES, BUT NEVER... NEVER HAVE I SEEN A TRUE DEMON.
LOOK AHEAD-- YOU SEE YON BRANCHING TUNNELS?
AYE...
THEY LEAD DOWN FROM THE OTHER GRAVES...
...BUT THEY ALL INTERSECT WITH THIS ONE MAIN TUNNEL...
THUS, AS THE LEGEND STATES, THE ENTIRE HONEYCOMB OF TUNNELS MUST LEAD TO BUT ONE PLACE-- THE VAULT OF THE DARK GOD.
AND JUST WHAT IS THIS LEGEND, ALCEMIDES?
WHO IS THIS DARK GOD?


MURGOR-TSOGGUA IS A DEMON WHO WAS ONCE SUMMONED AND BOUND IN DARK SERVITUDE BY AN ANCIENT SORCERER MORE YEARS AGO THAN HISTORY CAN REMEMBER.
THUS, WE CAN ONLY RELY ON THE LEGEND WHICH CLAIMS THAT THE SORCERER--WITH HIS DEMON SERVANT AND ARMY OF SUBORDINATE CREATURES--TERRORIZED TARANTIA FOR DECADES.
IT WAS SAID THAT THE LESSER CREATURES PROVIDED THOSE SOULS NECESSARY TO KEEP MURGOR-TSOGGUA ALIVE--AND, IN TURN, MURGOR-TSOGGUA PROVIDED WHATEVER SERVICES WERE NECESSARY TO FURTHER THE SORCERER'S POWER AND GOALS.
THEN, FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON, IT ALL CAME TO A HALT--PRESUMABLY WITH THE SORCERER'S DEATH.

WE CAN ONLY THEORIZE THAT THE DEMONIC DARK GOD LIES HELPLESSLY DORMANT WITHOUT A MAGE TO SUMMON HIM FROM THE OTHER PLANE.
BUT THE SUBORDINATE CREATURES--THOSE YOU SLEW ABOVE--HAVE OBVIOUSLY SURVIVED, UNSUSPECTED, DOWN HERE ALL ALONG, FEEDING ON OUR DEAD.

BUT THAT'S CHANGED NOW...
THEY'VE TAKEN AT LEAST ONE OF OUR LIVING--MY SON.

I WARNED YOU LAST NIGHT, CONAN--THE OMENS...THE STARS, THE COMET, THE CRAZED RAVEN...
KEEP YOUR OMENS, ALCEMIDES, AND--
WAIT! THE TUNNEL OPENS INTO A LARGER CHAMBER, AND...

WHAT IN THE NAME OF CROM?! A DOOR--WITHOUT A WALL--STANDING IN THE CENTER OF THE CHAMBER...
THEN IT...IT MUST BE ...THE DOORWAY TO THE DARK GOD'S MYSTICAL PLANE!
SHLURRR

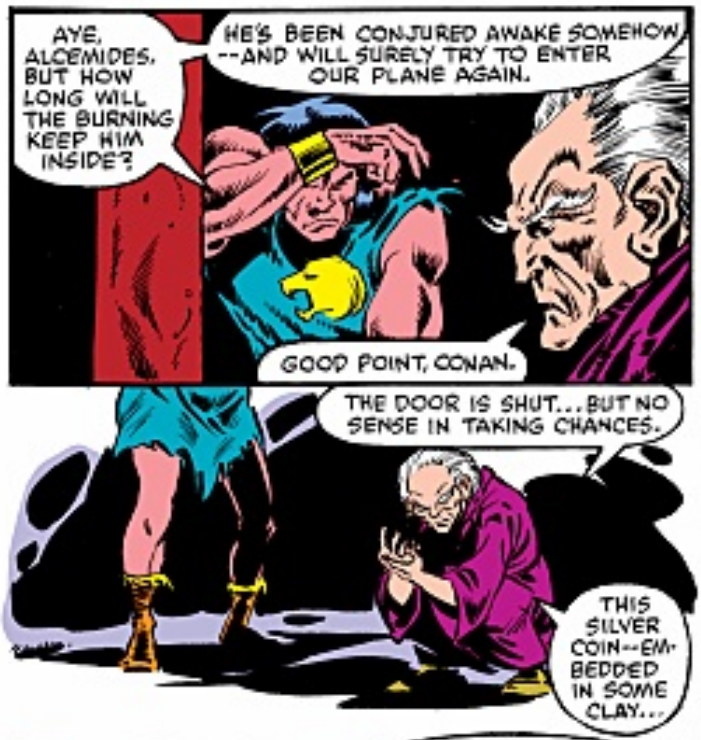
BEHIND US, CONAN! THE TUNNEL WALLS ARE COMING ALIVE-- MORE OF THE MONSTERS BURSTING OUT!
SHLURRR
THEY'RE FORCING US INTO THE CHAMBER-- BLOCKING THE WAY OUT--TRAPPING US IN HERE!
AYE... NOW'S THE TIME TO STAND FAST AND FREE OUR STEEL...
SHLURRR
...AND SHOW THEM THAT A TRAP CAN CATCH MORE THAN ONE KIND OF GAME!
CONAN, LEAVING THE GUARDS TO FEND FOR THEMSELVES WHILE HE PROTECTS ALCEMIDES, DOES NOT NOTICE THAT ONE MAN IS OVER-WHELMED...
...NOT AT FIRST, ANYWAY...
...NOT UNTIL THE MAN IS DRAGGED TO THE MASSIVE, WALL-LESS DOOR...
...NOT UNTIL THE DOOR GRATINGLY CRACKS OPEN UPON SOME MISTY AND NIGHTMARISH OTHER-REALM...
...AND NOT UNTIL A FOUL-SMELLING TENDRIL OF MIST IS FREED FROM THAT DARK BEYOND.
AND BY THEN, THERE IS NAUGHT BUT A BLINDING DISINTE-GRATION-- AND AN EAR-SPLITTING SHRIEK...
CROM'S BLOOD--! THAT...THAT MAN--!
WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?!
WHAT DID YOU FIENDS DO TO HIM?!

THEN COMES A STARK MOMENT MUCH LIKE THE ONE DESTINED TO HERALD WORLD'S END.
THE DOOR FLIES OPEN AND A FIERCE, KEENING WIND SEEMS TO SUCK ALL LIFE FROM THE CHAMBER...AND, TOO, THERE IS THE LIGHT, THE WHITEST AND MOST PAINFUL LIGHT MAN HAS EVER SEEN.
CONAN HEARS NOTHING BUT AN EVER LOUDER ROAR, WHILE HIS EYES ARE ASSAILED WITH THE BRIGHTNESS OF A THOUSAND SUNS.
THEN FROM THE BLINDING MIST STRIDES A HUGE SHAPE WHICH IS SEEN AS NO MORE THAN SHADOW...
...YET THAT DISTORTED GLIMPSE IS MORE THAN ENOUGH TO BRAND IT FAR MORE AWESOME IN ITS HORROR THAN ANY OF THE BATRACHIAN MONSTERS THUS FAR ENCOUNTERED.
ALCEMIDES' VOICE SHRIEKS ABOVE THE HOWLING WIND...
MUARGOR-TSOGGUA! THE DARK GOD HIMSELF --RETURNING TO LIFE-- AND THE DOORWAY TO OUR PLANE IS OPEN TO HIM!
FIRE AND SILVER, CONAN! THE ONLY ELEMENTS WITH POWER AGAINST A DEMON!
CONAN MURMURS, "AYE!" RECALLING THE DEMON WHICH GUARDED THE TREASURE OF TRANICOS -- THE VERY TREASURE WHICH FINANCED THE REVOLT TO SEAT HIM AS KING OF AQUILONIA...
YET EVEN AS THESE MEMORIES SWIRL IN HIS MIND, HE STANDS TRANSFIXED BY WIND AND LIGHT... AND THE DEMON STRIDES CLOSER...
...CLOSE ENOUGH NOW FOR CONAN TO SEE A GIRDLE OF THREE ROUNDISH OBJECTS...
SKULLS --!
THE THING WEARS A BELT OF SKULLS!
CONN! COULD ONE OF THE GRISLY OBJECTS BELONG TO--
THE DOOR, CONAN! SHUT THE DOOR-- BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!!
NO! WHAT... WHAT IF... CONN'S IN THERE?!
IF HE IS, THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO FOR HIM!!
WOULD YOU SACRIFICE YOUR ENTIRE KINGDOM IN THE VAIN HOPE OF FINDING A SON WHO IS ALREADY LOST--?!
THERE IS TRUTH IN THE HARSH WORDS, CONAN KNOWS -- IN HIS MIND IF NOT HIS HEART...

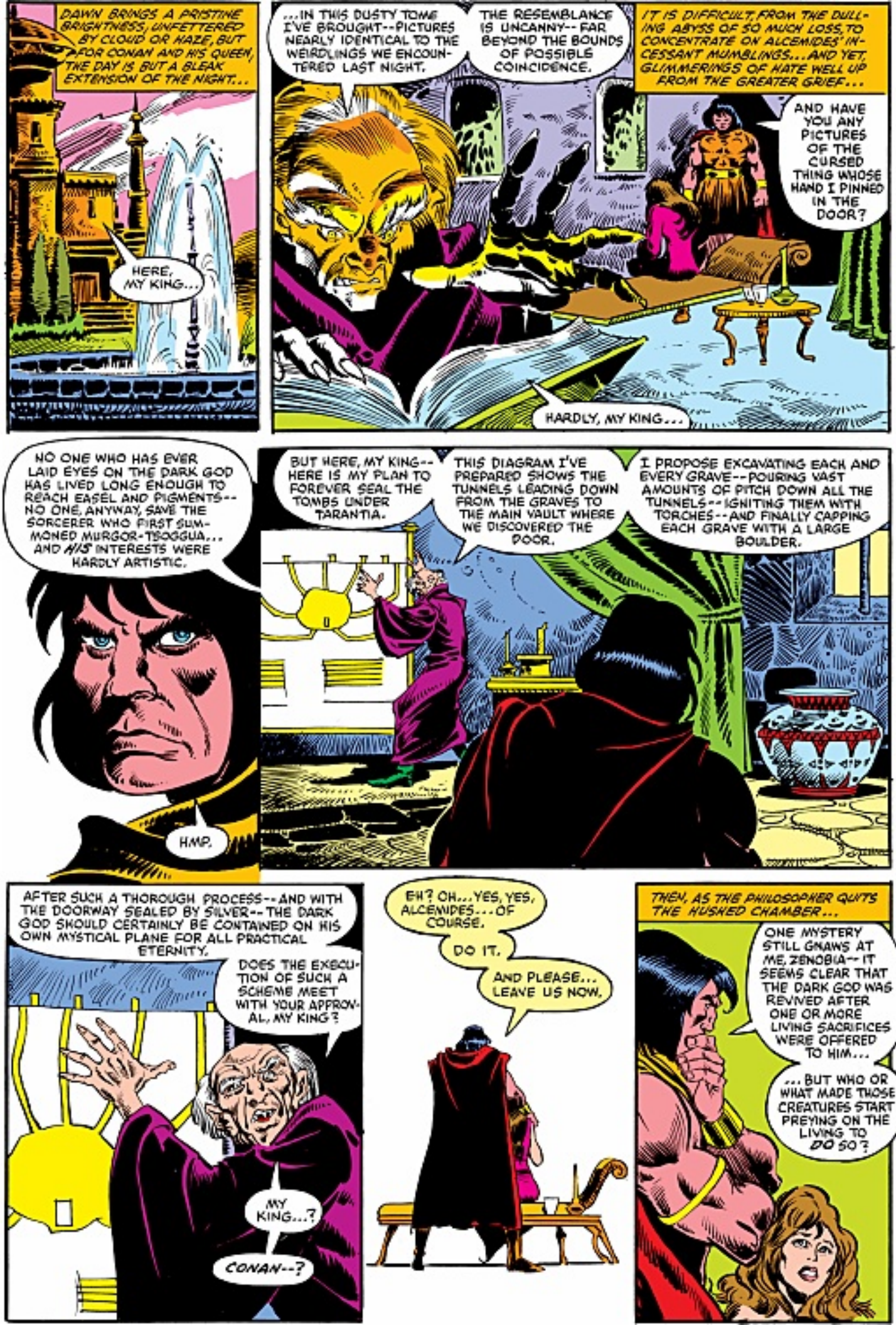
AND, AS THE PHILOSOPHER'S HOARSE CRY SOUNDS YET AGAIN...
SHUT THE DOOR, CONAN, I BEG OF YOU -- BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!!
THE KING'S HEART, AT LAST, JOINS HIS MIND.
YES -- IT MUST BE SHUT! BUT... CROM'S BLOOD... IT HAS A WEIGHT FAR BEYOND ITS SIZE!
EVEN WITH ALL MY STRENGTH ...I CAN... HARDLY ...BUDGE IT...
THERE... IT MOVES NOW... BUT SLOWLY... TOO SLOWLY...
MITRA SAVE US!
IT'S TOO LATE!
THE DARK GOD... HAS REACHED THE DOOR!
CONAN! HE'S GOT A HOLD ON OUR PLANE! YOU MUST FORCE HIM BACK INSIDE AND SHUT THE DOOR!
DO YOU HEAR ME, CONAN?!
I... I CANNOT, ALCEMIDES! HIS... HIS STRENGTH... IS TOO GREAT!
FIRE!
GIVE ME THAT TORCH -- QUICKLY, MAN!

ALCEMIDES DASHES NAKED FLAME ON THE TALONED HAND--
--AND THE WIND, INCREDIBLY, SHRIEKS ITS FURY EVEN LOUDER...
BUT THE HAND, AT LEAST, DOES RECOIL...

...AND ALL IS ABRUPTLY SILENT, SAVE FOR THE HOLLOW ECHOING OF THE SLAMMED DOOR--AND ALL IS GLOOMY AGAIN, TOO, SAVE FOR THE FLICKER OF THE PHILOSOPHER'S TORCH.
FIRE AND SILVER, CONAN...PRAISE MITRA AT LEAST FIRE WAS AT HAND...

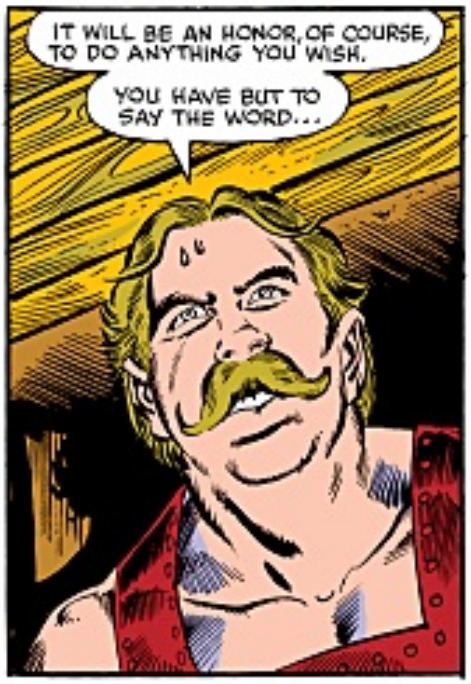

AYE, ALCEMIDES, BUT HOW LONG WILL THE BURNING KEEP HIM INSIDE?
HE'S BEEN CONJURED AWAKE SOMEHOW --AND WILL SURELY TRY TO ENTER OUR PLANE AGAIN.
GOOD POINT, CONAN.
THE DOOR IS SHUT...BUT NO SENSE IN TAKING CHANCES.
THIS SILVER COIN--EMBEDDED IN SOME CLAY...
...AND SEALED OVER THE DOOR SHOULD IMPRISON HIM SUFFICIENTLY.
NOW...IF WE CAN SEAL THESE CATACOMBS TO PREVENT ANYONE FROM REMOVING THE COIN AND OPENING THE DOOR...MURGOR-TSOGGUA, EVEN THOUGH AWAKE, SHALL REMAIN HARMLESS TO US.

I'VE SEEN MY FIRST TRUE DEMON, CONAN...AND I WAS A FOOL TO EVER WISH FOR SUCH A SIGHT.
BUT HE IS GONE.
AYE, ALCEMIDES ...HE IS GONE...
...AND MY SON...IS GONE, TOO.


DAWN BRINGS A PRISTINE BRIGHTNESS, UNFETTERED BY CLOUD OR HAZE, BUT FOR CONAN AND HIS QUEEN, THE DAY IS BUT A BLEAK EXTENSION OF THE NIGHT...
HERE, MY KING...
...IN THIS DUSTY TOME I'VE BROUGHT--PICTURES NEARLY IDENTICAL TO THE WEIRDLINGS WE ENCOUNTERED LAST NIGHT.
THE RESEMBLANCE IS UNCANNY--FAR BEYOND THE BOUNDS OF POSSIBLE COINCIDENCE.
IT IS DIFFICULT, FROM THE DULLING ABYSS OF SO MUCH LOSS, TO CONCENTRATE ON ALCEMIDES' INCESSANT MUMBLINGS...AND YET, GLIMMERINGS OF HATE WELL UP FROM THE GREATER GRIEF...
AND HAVE YOU ANY PICTURES OF THE CURSED THING WHOSE HAND I PINNED IN THE DOOR?
HARDLY, MY KING...
NO ONE WHO HAS EVER LAID EYES ON THE DARK GOD HAS LIVED LONG ENOUGH TO REACH EASEL AND PIGMENTS--NO ONE, ANYWAY, SAVE THE SORCERER WHO FIRST SUMMONED MURGOR-TSOGGUA... AND HIS INTERESTS WERE HARDLY ARTISTIC.
HMP.
BUT HERE, MY KING--HERE IS MY PLAN TO FOREVER SEAL THE TOMBS UNDER TARANTIA.
THIS DIAGRAM I'VE PREPARED SHOWS THE TUNNELS LEADING DOWN FROM THE GRAVES TO THE MAIN VAULT WHERE WE DISCOVERED THE DOOR.
I PROPOSE EXCAVATING EACH AND EVERY GRAVE--POURING VAST AMOUNTS OF PITCH DOWN ALL THE TUNNELS--IGNITING THEM WITH TORCHES--AND FINALLY CAPPING EACH GRAVE WITH A LARGE BOULDER.
AFTER SUCH A THOROUGH PROCESS--AND WITH THE DOORWAY SEALED BY SILVER--THE DARK GOD SHOULD CERTAINLY BE CONTAINED ON HIS OWN MYSTICAL PLANE FOR ALL PRACTICAL ETERNITY.
DOES THE EXECUTION OF SUCH A SCHEME MEET WITH YOUR APPROVAL, MY KING?
MY KING...?
CONAN--?
EH? OH...YES, YES, ALCEMIDES...OF COURSE.
DO IT.
AND PLEASE... LEAVE US NOW.
THEN, AS THE PHILOSOPHER QUITS THE HUSHED CHAMBER...
ONE MYSTERY STILL GNAWS AT ME, ZENOBIA--IT SEEMS CLEAR THAT THE DARK GOD WAS REVIVED AFTER ONE OR MORE LIVING SACRIFICES WERE OFFERED TO HIM...
...BUT WHO OR WHAT MADE THOSE CREATURES START PREYING ON THE LIVING TO DO SO?

EVEN ALCEMIDES, FOR ALL HIS ENDLESS THINKING, HAS NO IDEAS ON THAT...
...BUT I'M CERTAIN THAT THE DEVILISH PROCESS MUST HAVE BEEN INITIATED BY ONE OF MY ENEMIES...
AYE, CONAN, YOU'RE NEVER IN SHORT SUPPLY OF ENEMIES, ARE YOU?
AND THEY'RE ALWAYS STRIKING AT YOU, MY HUSBAND, AREN'T THEY?-- ALWAYS FORCING US TO LIVE IN FEAR, WITH ONE FOOT EVER ON A CRUMBLING PARAPET AND THE OTHER IN A MOLDERING GRAVE!
IF IT WEREN'T FOR YOU, CONN WOULD STILL BE--
SILENCE, WOMAN! I STAND HERE BENUMBED BY THE DARKEST FEELING MY HEART HAS EVER KNOWN--AND YOU DARE TO SAY ALL THIS IS MY FAULT?!
DO YOU THINK I WANTED TO LOSE OUR SON?! MITRA'S HELL, WOMAN, I'M A KING--AND KINGS ARE EVER PLAGUED WITH ENEMIES!
YOU...YOU'RE RIGHT, CONAN...S-SOMETHING HAPPENED TO ME... TO MY MIND...
OF COURSE IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT.
I...I'M SORRY...
NO, BY CROM... YOU WERE RIGHT, ZENOBIA.
KING OR NOT, IT IS MY FAULT. CONN IS MY SON AND I ABANDONED HIM--SHUT THE DOOR ON HIM!
I...I KNEW IT EVEN AS THE DARK GOD LOOMED TOWARD ME...EVEN AS I FLINCHED AND TRIED TO SHUT HIM OUT. BUT NOT THIS TIME, ZENOBIA...
THIS TIME I'M GOING TO OPEN THAT DOOR AND GO AFTER MY SON--
--NO MATTER WHAT KIND OF FIEND STANDS IN MY WAY!

SOON, THE BITTER SCENT OF RAGE FILLING CONAN'S SOUL GIVES WAY TO THE ACRID FUMES OF MOLTEN METAL...
HO, TAURUS!
MY KING! CAN I BE OF SERVICE TO YOU AGAIN SO SOON--?


IT WILL BE AN HONOR, OF COURSE, TO DO ANYTHING YOU WISH.
YOU HAVE BUT TO SAY THE WORD...

AYE, TAURUS--YOUR RECENT GIFT OF A SWORD SERVED ME IN GOOD STEAD, EVEN IF IT WAS NOT AS TRUE AS MY OWN BLADE.*
I WANT YOU, NOW, TO FORGE ANOTHER--EQUALLY AS GOOD...
*LAST ISSUE--Louise

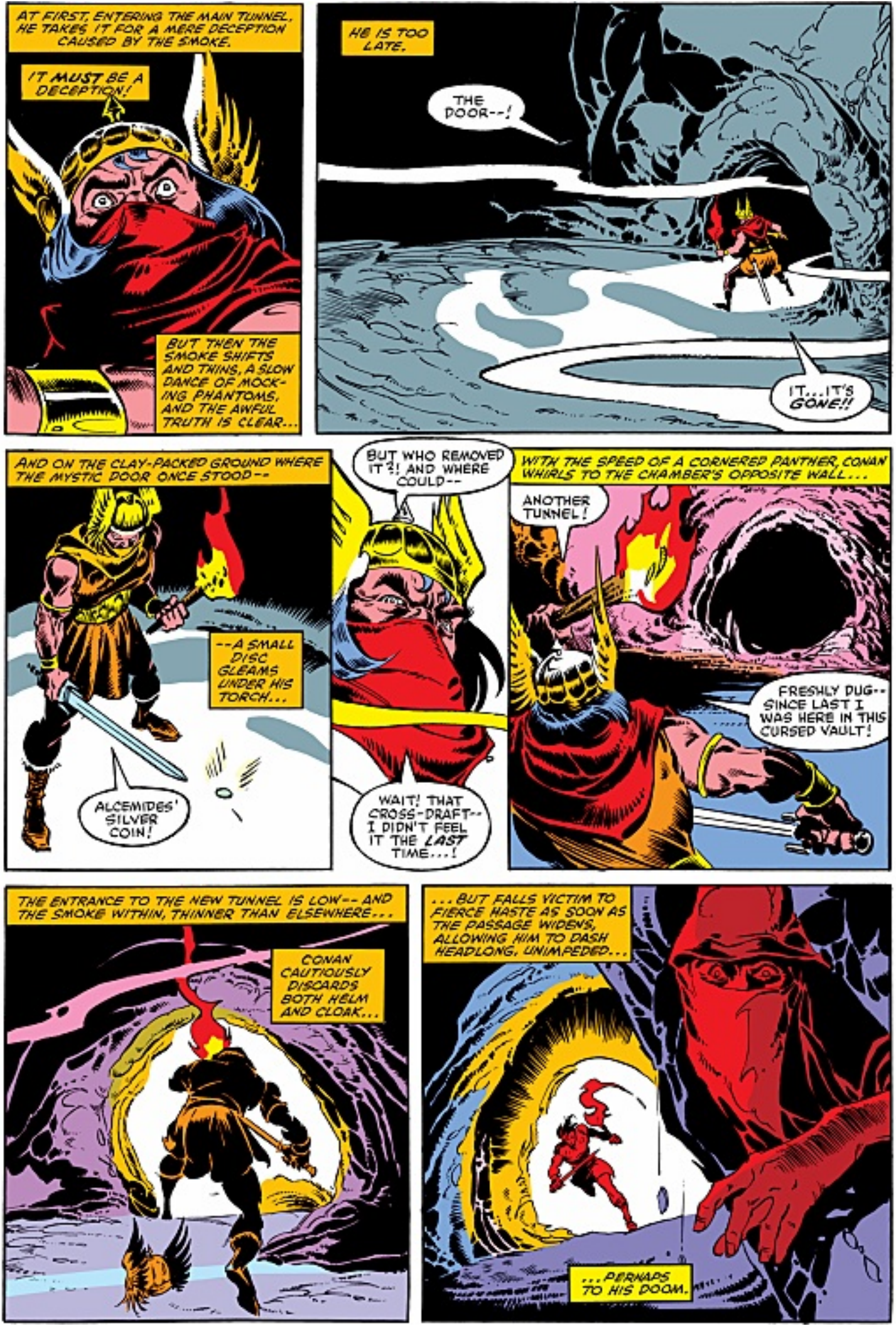
...FROM THIS!
BUT... MY KING... WHAT IS IT? A...A TREASURE...

SILVER, TAURUS--EACH AND EVERY PIECE.
I WANT THEM SMELTED INTO A SWORD BEFORE NIGHTFALL.

BUT MY KING...THESE GOBLETS... PIECES OF JEWELRY...INGOTS... SURELY THEY ARE PRICELESS!
ARE YOU CERTAIN YOU WANT--
I WANT A SILVER SWORD, TAURUS. BY NIGHTFALL.
I SHALL WAIT FOR IT HERE.
O-OF COURSE, MY KING--I'LL BEGIN AT ONCE.

NIGHTFALL...
HEAVY INDEED, TAURUS, AS YOU WARNED...
BUT FOR MY PURPOSES, IT'S PERFECT.
WELL DONE.
THANK YOU, MY KING.
BUT...MAY I ASK WHAT YOU PLAN TO DO WITH SUCH A SWORD?
I PLAN, TAURUS...
...TO GO DOWN FIGHTING.
THE GLOW HAS BEEN EVIDENT FROM HALFWAY DOWN THE NARROW STREET-- BUT NOW, AS CONAN CLATTERS FROM COBBLES INTO GRAVEYARD, THE FULL SIGHT JOLTS HIS HEART WITH SHOCK.
PILLARS OF FIRE-- RISING FROM THE GRAVES!
OF COURSE-- ALCEMIDES' PLAN! ISHTAR CURSE THE MUMBLER FOR BEING SO EFFICIENT--
--AND CROM CURSE ME FOR BARELY HEEDING HIS INTENTIONS!

HO, MEN-- HALT YOUR WORK! STAY THAT TORCH!
IT'S THE KING HIMSELF!
AYE-- NO MISTAKING THAT FIGURE!
AT LEAST YOU HAVEN'T IGNITED ALL THE TUNNELS, PHILOSOPHER.
NO, CONAN, NOT YET... BUT WHAT--
STILL, YOU HAVE FILLED THEM ALL WITH PITCH, I SEE.
IT'LL BE STICKY GOING, THEN, BUT AT LEAST PASSABLE.
PASSABLE? WHAT ARE YOU-- THAT SWORD YOU WEAR! IT'S MADE OF SILVER!
AYE-- THE PUREST SILVER AQUILONIA'S ROYAL VAULTS CONTAINED.
THEN YOU... YOU MEAN TO ENTER THE CATACOMBS... THE TOMB OF THE DARK GOD... AND... AND OPEN THE DOOR...!
BUT YOU CANNOT, CONAN! I BEG YOU-- YOU CAN'T DO IT!
JUST TRY TO STOP ME, ALCEMIDES.
SCREENED BY CLOAK MUFFLING MOUTH AND NOSE, THE SMOKE-LACED AIR IS AT LEAST BREATHABLE...
...BUT WHAT IF THE FUMES SHOULD BUILD TO THE FLASH POINT? WHAT IF--
KING CONAN SHRUGS, NEVER BREAKING STRIDE, HOLDING THE TORCH HIGH IN AN UNWAVERING GRASP... AND CONTINUES ONWARD.
THE MAIN CHAMBER, AND THE DOOR, YET LIES AHEAD.


AT FIRST, ENTERING THE MAIN TUNNEL, HE TAKES IT FOR A MERE DECEPTION CAUSED BY THE SMOKE.
IT MUST BE A DECEPTION!
BUT THEN THE SMOKE SHIFTS AND THINS, A SLOW DANCE OF MOCKING PHANTOMS, AND THE AWFUL TRUTH IS CLEAR...
HE IS TOO LATE.
THE DOOR--!
IT...IT'S GONE!!
AND ON THE CLAY-PACKED GROUND WHERE THE MYSTIC DOOR ONCE STOOD--
--A SMALL DISC GLEAMS UNDER HIS TORCH...
ALCEMIDES' SILVER COIN!
BUT WHO REMOVED IT?! AND WHERE COULD--
WAIT! THAT CROSS-DRAFT-- I DIDN'T FEEL IT THE LAST TIME...!
WITH THE SPEED OF A CORNERED PANTHER, CONAN WHIRLS TO THE CHAMBER'S OPPOSITE WALL...
ANOTHER TUNNEL!
FRESHLY DUG-- SINCE LAST I WAS HERE IN THIS CURSED VAULT!
THE ENTRANCE TO THE NEW TUNNEL IS LOW-- AND THE SMOKE WITHIN, THINNER THAN ELSEWHERE...
CONAN CAUTIOUSLY DISCARDS BOTH HELM AND CLOAK...
...BUT FALLS VICTIM TO FIERCE HASTE AS SOON AS THE PASSAGE WIDENS, ALLOWING HIM TO DASH HEADLONG, UNIMPEDED...
...PERHAPS TO HIS DOOM.

AS HAPPENED DURING HIS FORAY INTO THIS SUB-TERRANEAN MAZE, THE TUNNEL WALL COMES ALIVE-- AND HE FREEZES AS DIRT ABRUPTLY EXPLODES OUTWARD, REVEALING A HIDDEN POCKET...
...AND FROM THE MOIST RECESS TUMBLES--
CROM'S BLOOD! ANOTHER OF THE MONSTERS!
NO, FATHER-- 'TIS ME!
CONN--?!
CONN!
YOU'RE ALIVE, SON! ALIVE!
BUT MITRA, SON-- I'D ALMOST SPIT YOU UPON A LENGTH OF SHARP SILVER!
WHAT HAPPENED? HOW DID YOU GET FREE? I KNOW THOSE VILE WEIRDLINGS CAPTURED YOU IN THE GRAVEYARD AND BROUGHT YOU DOWN HERE TO FEED THEIR DARK GOD--
AYE, FATHER, THOUGH "FEED" IS NOT QUITE THE PROPER WORD...
THEY NEEDED THREE SOULS TO BRING MURGOR-TSOGGUA BACK TO LIFE-- AND I WAS TO BE THE THIRD--BUT WHEN I SAW WHAT WAS BEHIND THAT DOOR, I PLAYED POSSUM AS THEY CAME FOR ME...
"THEN I SURPRISED ONE, THREW HIM INTO THE OTHERS-- AND RAN! THEY CHASED ME THROUGH THE TUNNELS FOR HOURS, BUT I ALWAYS MANAGED TO STAY AHEAD OF THEM...
"THEN I WATCHED FROM HIDING AND SAW HOW THEY GO TO SLEEP IN THESE POCKETS IN THE TUNNEL WALLS, SEALING THEMSELVES IN WITH A LAYER OF DIRT..."

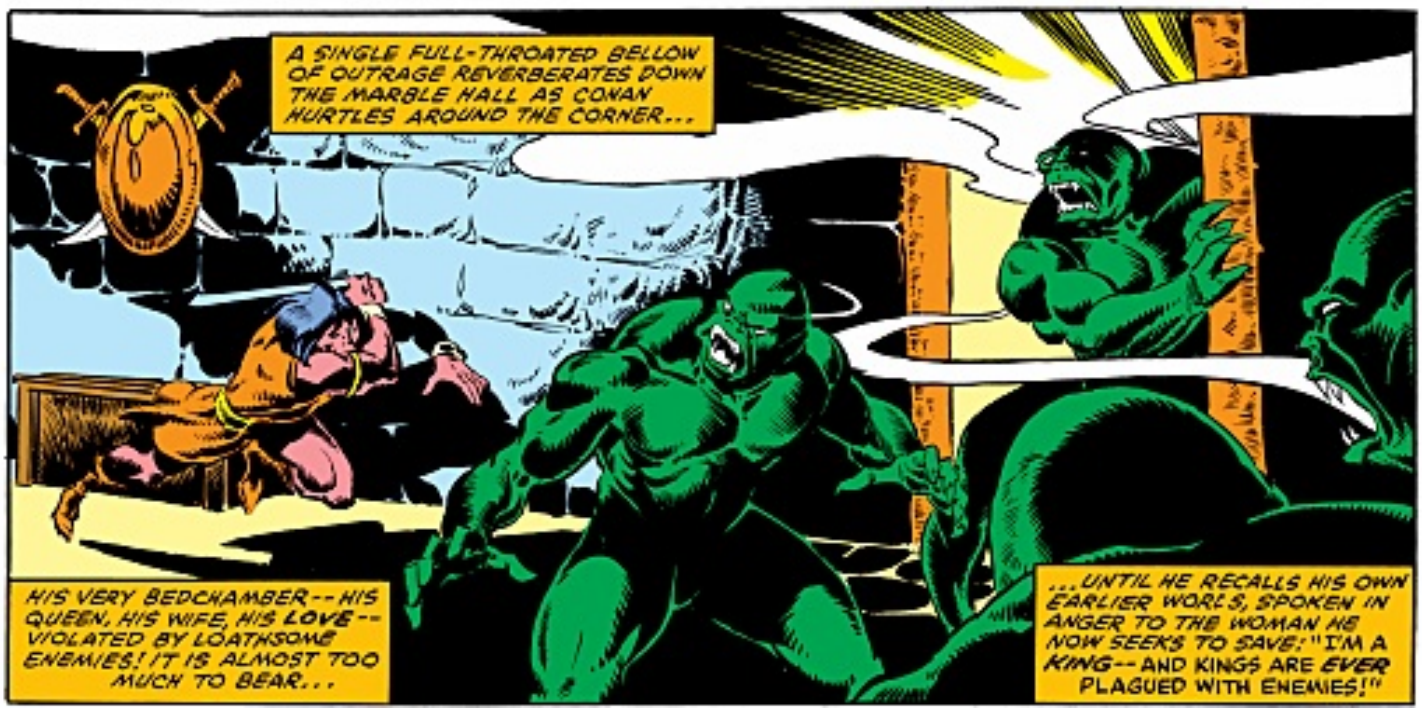
WHEN THEY STARTED DIGGING THIS NEW TUNNEL, I USED THEIR OWN TRICK--SEALED MYSELF IN THE SIDE--AND I'VE HID THERE EVER SINCE!
GOOD LAD! YOUR MOTHER AND I THOUGHT YOU WERE LOST!
BUT CONAN'S JOYFUL EYES SWIFTLY CLOUD...
THEN THE THIRD LIFE THEY NEEDED WAS PROVIDED BY MY GUARD--THE ONE I LOST IN THE CHAMBER BATTLE--AND THAT'S WHY MURGOR-TSOGGUA WAS THEN ABLE TO...
TELL ME, CONN, WHAT IS THIS TUNNEL? WHAT DO THEY USE IT FOR?
I KNOW NOT, FATHER, BUT LESS THAN AN HOUR AGO A HORDE OF THEM PASSED MY HIDING PLACE--WITH THE GIRL WHO LEADS THEM...
...THOUGH SHE SEEMS TO BE IN A TRANCE OF SOME SORT, A PUPPET OF SOME UNKNOWN FORCE.
A GIRL? HAVE YOU EVER SEEN HER BEFORE?
NO.
HMP--THEN LET'S SEE WHERE THEY WENT.
TAKE MY DIRK, LAD, AND STAY CLOSE TO ME.
BUT IT IS NOT LONG BEFORE THE KING FREEZES IN DREAD...
MITRA AND ISHTAR--IT CURVES HERE--CURVES TO THE EAST!
WH-WHAT IS IT, FATHER?
EAST, LAD--DON'T YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?!
THIS CURSED TUNNEL HEADS STRAIGHT TO THE PALACE--AND YOUR MOTHER!
FATHER AND SON BOTH RACE THROUGH THE CLAY BURROW NOW, NEITHER SAYING ANOTHER WORD UNTIL THE WAY BREAKS UPWARD, TOWARD A ROUGH CIRCLE OF LIGHT...
AYE, THEY'VE BEEN HERE, ALL RIGHT, THE DEVILS...
BUT THEY'RE GONE NOW. COME, LAD...
FATHER--!
IN MITRA'S NAME, FATHER--WHAT HAS HAPPENED?!

CONAN GROWLS HIS REPLY...
WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE? DEATH, CONN... BLOODY DEATH.
A FULL SCORE OF PALACE GUARDS--AND ENOUGH OF THE WEIRDLINGS TO PROVE THAT OUR MEN FOUGHT BITTERLY TO THE END.

A BLOOD-TRAIL--EVEN MORTAL WOUNDS COULDN'T KEEP THE FIENDS FROM THEIR MISSION...
FATHER! THAT LIGHT AROUND THE CORNER--!
IT'S THE SAME LIGHT THAT CAME FROM THE DOOR!

AND THE ROYAL BEDCHAMBER IS AROUND THAT CORNER!
THE LIGHT IS COMING FROM MOTHER'S ROOM!

AYE.


A SINGLE FULL-THROATED BELLOW OF OUTRAGE REVERBERATES DOWN THE MARBLE HALL AS CONAN HURTLES AROUND THE CORNER...
HIS VERY BEDCHAMBER--HIS QUEEN, HIS WIFE, HIS LOVE--VIOLATED BY LOATHSOME ENEMIES! IT IS ALMOST TOO MUCH TO BEAR...
...UNTIL HE RECALLS HIS OWN EARLIER WORDS, SPOKEN IN ANGER TO THE WOMAN HE NOW SEEKS TO SAVE: "I'M A KING--AND KINGS ARE EVER PLAGUED WITH ENEMIES!"

AND THEN, WITH A DEADLY CALM OF PURPOSE--
--THE KING HEFTS HIS SILVER SWORD IN AN IRON GRIP--
--AND, SPRAYING CRIMSON MIST, HACKS HIS WAY THROUGH ENEMIES AND DOORWAY ALIKE.
ZENOBIA!
HERE, CONAN! BUT DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME--I CAN HOLD THEM OFF!
BEHIND YOU, MY HUSBAND--BEHIND YOU!
EH--?
THE VENGEANCE OF THE SORCERER MIMUS, WREAKED UPON CONAN THE KING, NEARS ITS FINAL STAGE...
THAT VOICE!
COME FORTH, MURGOR-TSOGGUA! PASS THROUGH THE DOORWAY BETWEEN PLANES!
ENTER THIS REALM AND FEAST UPON THE BLOOD AND BONES OF CONAN THE KING!
DARWEENA! THE DAUGHTER OF MIMUS!
COME, MURGOR-TSOGGUA!
COME!
AND THE DOORWAY DARKENS... AS THE DARK GOD, IN DEMONIC MAJESTY, BRIDGES NAMELESS GULFS IN BUT A SINGLE STRIDE...

SILENCE SEEMS TO COAT THE CHAMBER, LIKE THICK BLOOD CONGEALING OVER A GLITTERING BLADE, UNTIL CONAN'S RASPING VOICE IS FINALLY HURLED LIKE A CHALLENGE...
MURGOR-TSOGGUA, HEAR ME! I AM CONAN--KING OF THIS LAND YOU HAVE NOW INVADED.
BY BIRTH I AM ALSO A BARBARIAN, ONE OF THOSE PEOPLES--UNLIKE SORCERERS--WHO HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN FEAR IN THE FACE OF THE SUPERNATURAL... YET, IN ME, FEAR HAS EVER BEEN BUT AN EDGE TO FURY!
MY SON STANDS READY TO DEFEND MY WIFE--AND I STAND READY NOT ONLY TO DEFEND THEM BOTH...
...BUT TO SEND YOU BACK, HOWLING, TO THE HELL WHENCE YOU CAME!
AND I, LITTLE KING, LITTLE BARBARIAN... I AM THE DARK GOD MURGOR-TSOGGUA, COME FROM MY PLANE IN THE VAST SPACE BETWEEN THE STARS!
I FEEL NO FEAR, NOR EVEN FURY... AND I SEE BEFORE ME NAUGHT BUT THE ONE I HAVE BEEN SUMMONED TO SLAY...
...AND THE ONE WHOSE BLOOD WILL, AT LAST, SLAKE MY THIRST.
ARE YOU READY, LITTLE KING... TO BLEED?
SLAY HIM, MURGOR-TSOGGUA!
S-SLAY...
...HIM?
AND DARWEENA STIFFENS AS MURGOR-TSOGGUA'S SHADOW CLEARS THE THRESHOLD...
NOW THAT THE DARK GOD HAS BRIDGED THE PLANES, THE SPELL ON HER MIND LIFTS LIKE BREEZE-BLOWN FOG...
WH-WHAT...?
CONAN! MY KING! THE SILVER COIN--I TOOK IT FROM THE DOOR! FORGIVE ME! I COULD NOT CONTROL MYSELF!
IT WAS MY FATHER'S SPELL--ENACTED TO CARRY OUT HIS VENGEANCE EVEN AFTER HIS DEATH! PLEASE FORGIVE ME--!
YOU'RE FORGIVEN, GIRL...

. . . IF YOU'LL JUST STAND CLEAR OF MY SWORD!
A BLADE OF SILVER--?! THEN YOU KNOW MY WEAKNESS, LITTLE KING?
AYE, DEMON, AND I'LL USE THAT WEAKNESS TO--
YOU'LL DO NOTHING!!
AAGH-H!
CONN--ZENOBIA--MY SWORD!
I...MUST... HAVE...THE SWORD...!

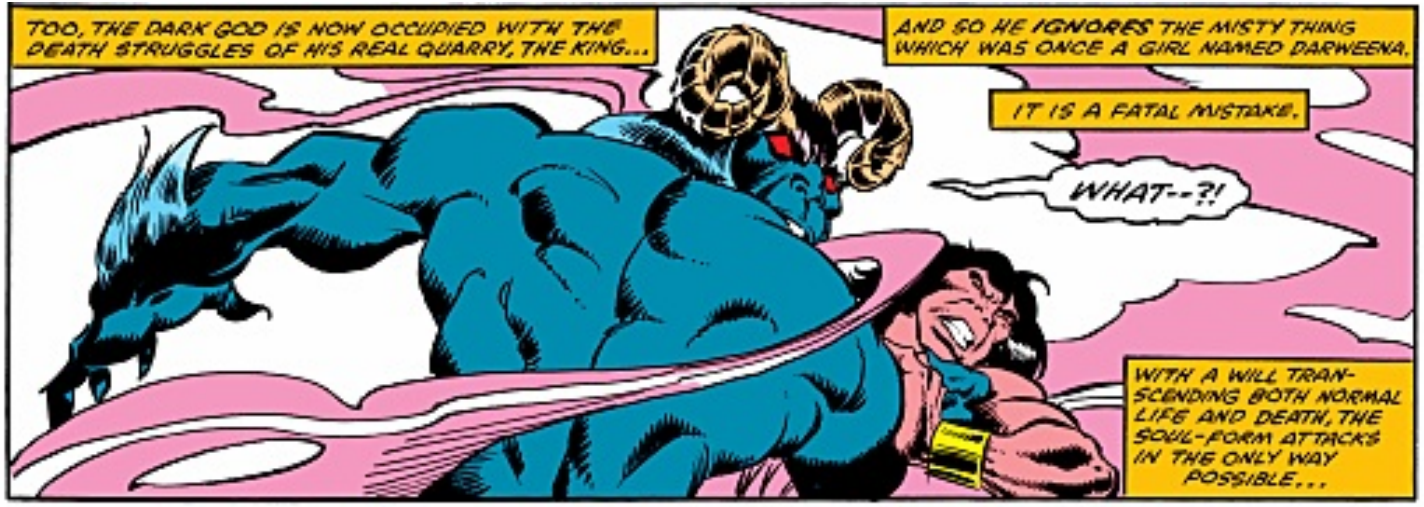
MY WIFE AND SON... IF YOU'VE KILLED THEM, YOU FIEND... I--
SILENCE, LITTLE MAN!
'TIS TIME TO OFFER YOUR VEINS--AND SLAKE THE THIRST OF MURGOR-TSOGGUA!

NOOOOOO
IT'S MY FAULT! I WON'T LET IT HAPPEN!!
DARWEENA WILL NEVER KNOW WHAT POSSESSED HER TO MAKE THE DESPERATE LUNGE--GUILT, VALOR, FEAR, SHEER ALTRUISM, REVERENCE FOR KING, OR EVEN SOME DEEPLY REPRESSED LOVE FOR CONAN THE MAN...

BUT WHATEVER FORM HER POSSESSION HAS TAKEN...
STUPID WOMAN!

...SHE IS GLADDENED, EVEN IN AGONIZING DEATH--
--THAT IT IS A FAR CRY FROM THE POSSESSION SPELLED BY HER FATHER.
THE CLOSE RANGE OF THE TWIN BLASTS, RENDERING HER FLESH INTO MIST, CONVERTS HER LIFE-ESSENCE INTO THE SOUL-FORM FAVORED FOR DIGESTION BY MURGOR-TSOGGUA...

YET THE DARK GOD HAS ALREADY SATED HIMSELF UPON THREE SUCH SOUL-FORMS, AND HAS NO TASTE FOR A FOURTH.


TOO, THE DARK GOD IS NOW OCCUPIED WITH THE DEATH STRUGGLES OF HIS REAL QUARRY, THE KING...
AND SO HE IGNORES THE MISTY THING WHICH WAS ONCE A GIRL NAMED DARWEENA.
IT IS A FATAL MISTAKE.
WHAT--?!
WITH A WILL TRANSCENDING BOTH NORMAL LIFE AND DEATH, THE SOUL-FORM ATTACKS IN THE ONLY WAY POSSIBLE...

...RECALLING, PERHAPS, A SIMILAR ATTACK FROM HER FATHER'S FORBIDDEN BOX.
NO! LET GO OF ME!!
THE SILVER SWORD-- GOT TO RETRIEVE IT!

CONAN'S BLUE EYES BLAZE, AND HIS TEETH SHOW IN A WOLFISH SNARL...
NOW, DEMON...
...ARE YOU READY TO BLEED?

ONCE...TWICE... THREE TIMES HE SLASHES-- EACH A MORTAL BLOW WERE IT DEALT TO ANY LESSER BEING.
YET, CONAN IS CONTENT WITH THE LESSENED EFFECT OF HIS EFFORTS...

...FOR EACH BLOW, WHILE NOT A KILLING ONE, HAS DRIVEN THE DARK GOD BACK, CLOSER AND CLOSER TO THE MYSTIC DOORWAY BETWEEN PLANES.
AND NOW, AS MURGOR-TSOGGUA TEETERS ON THE THRESHOLD--

BLACK, DEMON-- BACK TO THE HELL WHENCE YOU CAME!
--CONAN KICKS HIM IN.

THERE IS A BRIEF GLIMPSE OF MURGOR-TSOGGUA TUMBLING AND SCREAMING THROUGH A WHEELING VAULT OF STARS.
THEN THE DOOR SLAMS-- AND EXPLODES IN A BLINDING FISSION OF LIGHT.

FATHER--!
CONAN! MY HUSBAND--ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?!
AYE...BUT THE GIRL...DARWEENA ...SHE'S GONE...
I SAVED HER LIFE BUT ONCE...ON THE PLATEAU OF MISTS...AND NOW SHE'S TWICE REPAID THE SCORE...

FATHER--THE DOOR...EVEN THE DEAD MONSTERS... EVERYTHING IS *GONE!*
AYE, CONN--ALCEMIDES CREDITED THE DARK GOD'S FIRST DISAPPEARANCE TO THE DEATH OF THE ORIGINAL SORCERER WHO HAD SUMMONED HIM...

AND SINCE DARWEENA CONJURED THE DARK GOD THIS TIME...MURGOR-TSOGGUA HAS AGAIN BEEN BANISHED FROM THIS PLANE--BY *HER* DEATH.
NOW, COME--LET'S GAZE AT THE STARS.
I'VE NO DOUBT THAT ALCEMIDES' DIRE CONJURATIONS HAVE CHANGED...FOR THE BETTER.

INDEED, AFTER DARWEENA'S SACRIFICE, AND WITH THE WARMTH OF YOUR TWO BODIES AT MY SIDES, I BEGIN TO THINK THAT MY LIFE...IS CHARMED.
FAR, FAR AWAY, IN THE VAST SPACE BETWEEN THE SCATTERED STARS, A DEMON TUMBLES...A DEMON SHRIEKS.
NEXT ISSUE
CONAN BOLDLY FACES THE CHALLENGE OF THREE MURDEROUS WIZARDS IN--
CIRCLE OF SORCERY!

KING CONAN

% MARVEL COMICS GROUP
387 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

LOUISE JONES
EDITOR
DANNY FINGEROTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Louise and the KING CONAN crew,

I was positively elated at seeing KING CONAN #10! Ernie Chan's artwork on "The Fang of Set" was magnificent. I've seen his artwork before, but never on a complete job for Marvel. It's obvious that KING CONAN is a labor of love for Ernie, and, believe me, it shows.

Don't think I'm leaving out Doug, becuase the characterization of Conan as King is very good. He has pointed out that Zenobia is far more important to the kingdom than even Conan cares to admit. It's good that Doug is giving the supporting characters (Trocero, etc.) a sense of reality. Conn's leaving allows a sub-plot for future adventures. In other word's, Doug's doing a great job.

And a few final words to Louise, to compliment her for tying this whole issue together. Most readers don't realize how big a job it is to coordinate all the plots, stories, art and deadlines, and it must be even more difficult on KING CONAN. Being from the 12¢ comic generation, I'm anxious to get as much for my buck as possible, and you always make sure I do. I hope you'll stick around to guide the KING CONAN team for a long, long time. Thanks.

Gordon Manley
P. O. Box 30211
Portsmouth, VA 23701

Shucks, Gordon, editing's hard, but it does have its rewards. After all where else would we get to read such nice letters? Thanks to you, too.

Dear Hyborians,

Why is KING CONAN the best Conan title of all?

1) The art. Both Buscema and Chan portray Conan's world in all the barbaric splendor it deserves.

2) The writing. Doug Moench has a great feel for the prose that Conan's creator, Robert E. Howard, used to depict Conan's adventures. It is colorful and very dramatic without being corny — a difficult feat. He also manages to make Conan say believably intelligent things, something that other writers sometimes have difficulty with.

3) Respect for Robert E. Howard. I appreciate this most of all. You guys are using the characters and setting of Howard's Hyborian age without distorting them. Bravo.

4) Size. The large size of KING CONAN gives our hero lots of room to move around in. Story and character development can, and does, occur. Conan, the epic hero, fits best in an epic format.

I hope that's praise enough to hold you for a little while. The only thing you could do to please me further would be to produce more continued stories and to cook up some new, suitably nasty villains, with a life expectancy of more than one issue.

Chris Hocking
434 Anderson
Ann Arbor, MI 48109

Fortunately for you, Chris — and *un*fortunatley for the King — there are some villains at work even now, plotting doom and destruction for Conan, who have a life expectancy of much more than one issue. They're gonna keep you *both* on your toes!

Dear King Conan Chroniclers,

You've done it. I don't know how, but KING CONAN #10 somehow brought me the same feeling of magic as the first time I read the CONAN comic book. I've been buying KING CONAN mainly for John Buscems's artwork. Now you've given me two different reasons: Doug Moench's writing and Ernie Chan's art. Both are fantastic, and I hope to see them around for a long time. The new book has a new magic, similar to the old but different enough to be completely refreshing. You two have what it takes. Thanks for the magic.

Kevin Armstrong
Rte. 3
New Philadelphia, OH 44663

Dear Doug, Ernie and Louise,

When I pick up a copy of KING CONAN, I get the feeling that I used to get when I began reading Conan all those many years ago: a feeling of excitement and satisfaction and of knowing I'll be pleased. Any chance of getting Doug to script all Conan books? How about bringing back good old SAVAGE TALES in the dollar format? It could have stories of Prince Conn, Red Sonja, Kull, Chane, Bront and any other barbaric stars you have, two stories per issue on a rotating basis. And after two years, don't you think it's time we had a title for a letters page?

Al Anderson
707 South Spring St.
Talladega, Al 35160

Get Doug to write all the Conan titles? With all the work he's got on THOR, MASTER OF KUNG FU, and MOON KNIGHT, we just don't think he has the time. As for your other suggestions, we probably won't be bringing back SAVAGE TALES, but we do have an announcement to make in the near future that will definitely be to your liking. And you're absolutely right; it is time this page had a title. Any suggestions?

Dear Louise,

I don't normally buy "barbarian" books, no matter how well drawn. But if the writer is a favorite. . . let me just say that as long as Doug Moench stays with KING CONAN, you have a convert here. By the way, the art is fine, but it's Doug's characterizations that are really attractive. The best way I can describe it is that I feel "comfortable" reading the book, and happy.

C. J. Barragan III
536 Clayton
San Francisco, CA 94117

Welcome aboard, C. J. Now that you've realized the joys of Conan, are you sure we can't interest you in CONAN THE BARBARIAN and SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN? Doug doesn't write 'em — but he *reads* 'em!

Dear Doug and Ernie,

When I first sat down to read my brand new mags, I noticed that Big John Buscema didn't draw it. CATASTROPHE! But I soon calmed down when I saw that my favorite inker, Ernie Chan, did the pencils and inks. WOW! Conclusion? Fabulous scripting + superb art = great issue.

Rick Davis
101 Ornida Ave.
Beaver, PA 15009

We're glad your story came to a happy ending, but we fully understand your obsession with John B. — which is why we're happy to announce that he's returning to pencil *and* ink CONAN THE BARBARIAN with issue #140, as well as penciling SAVAGE SWORD again, virtually every issue. (And did we mention that he adapted, drew and colored MARVEL SUPER SPECIAL #21, THE CONAN MOVIE, which was deftly scripted by Michael Fleisher? It should be on your newsstands about the time you read this.)

Before we forget, next issue features a special art job by newcomer Marc Silvestri, who made his dynamic debut in CONAN #135. Be here, you just might enjoy it.

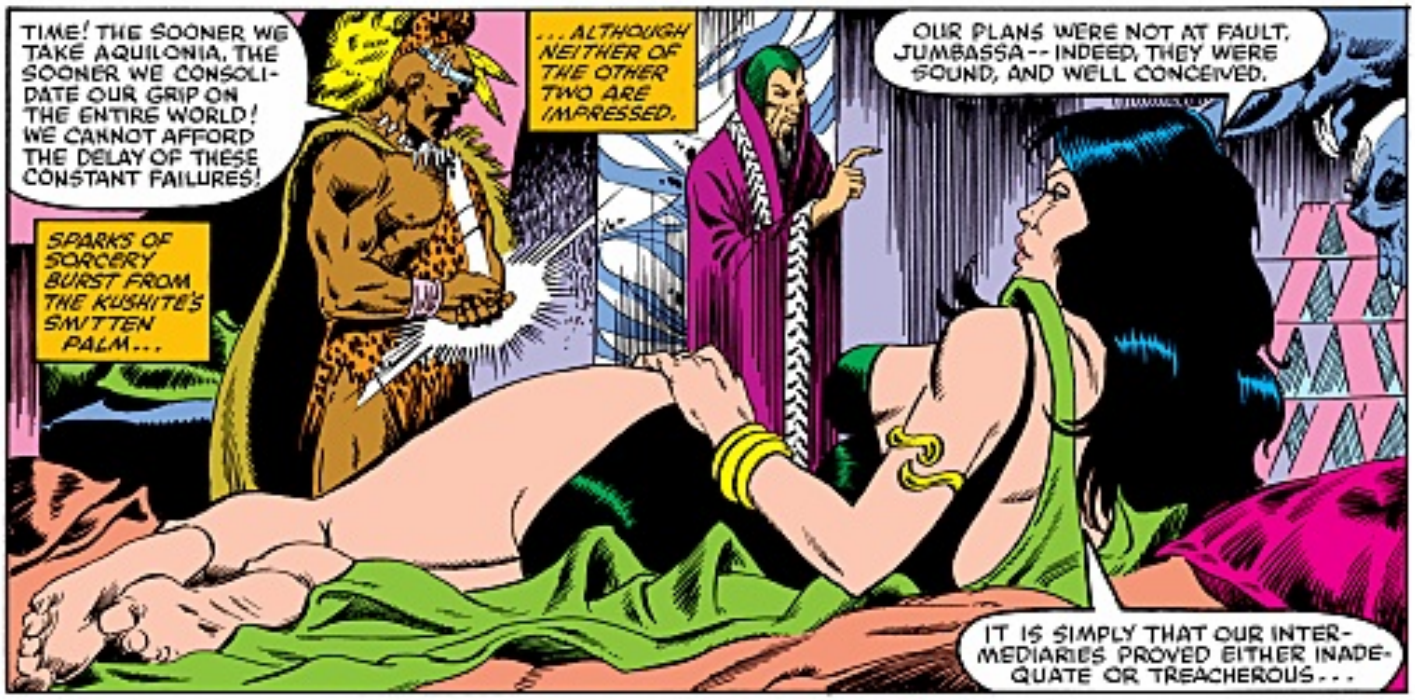
COVER PENCILER: MARC SILVESTRI

COVER INKER: RICARDO VILLAMONTE

Stan Lee PRESENTS: KING CONAN

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD

DOUG MOENCH - WRITER · MARK SILVESTRI - PENCILER · RICHARD VILLAMONTE - INKER · JOE ROSEN - LETTERER · GEORGE ROUSSOS - COLORIST · LOUISE JONES - EDITOR · JIM SHOOTER - EDITOR-IN-CHIEF


TIME! THE SOONER WE TAKE AQUILONIA, THE SOONER WE CONSOLIDATE OUR GRIP ON THE ENTIRE WORLD! WE CANNOT AFFORD THE DELAY OF THESE CONSTANT FAILURES!
SPARKS OF SORCERY BURST FROM THE KUSHITE'S SMITTEN PALM...
...ALTHOUGH NEITHER OF THE OTHER TWO ARE IMPRESSED.
OUR PLANS WERE NOT AT FAULT, JUMBASSA-- INDEED, THEY WERE SOUND, AND WELL CONCEIVED.
IT IS SIMPLY THAT OUR INTERMEDIARIES PROVED EITHER INADEQUATE OR TREACHEROUS...

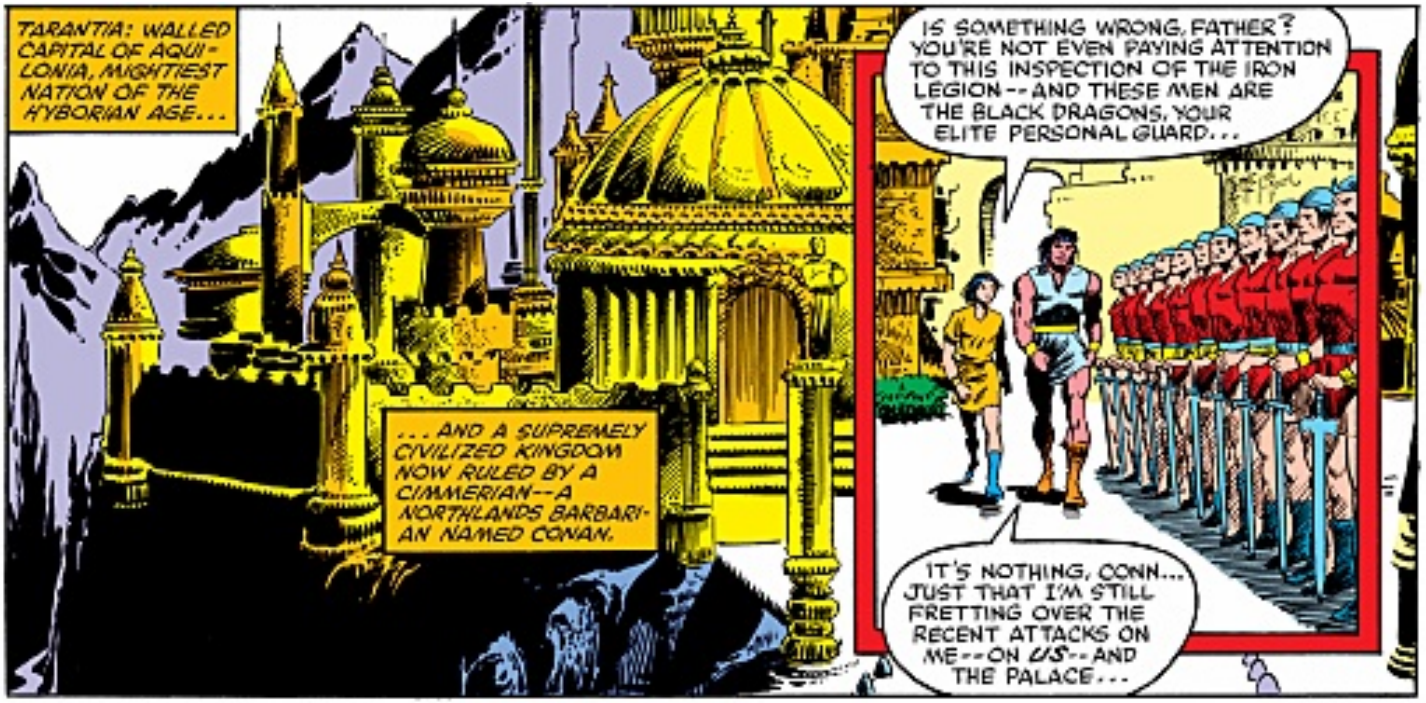
ARE YOU SUGGESTING, SCYLLANA, THAT WE HAVE FAILED BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN TOO INDIRECT?
PRECISELY, URAZAI.
WHAT DO YOU THINK, JUMBASSA?

I THINK YOU ARE BOTH MAD! YOU WOULD HAVE US DIRECTLY CONFRONT CONAN-- OURSELVES?

IT'S A THOUGHT, JUMBASSA. AFTER ALL, WE FORM A CABAL OF THE THREE MOST POWERFUL WIZARDS IN EXISTENCE.
AS I SAY, IT'S A THOUGHT... AND I THINK OUR SISTER SCYLLANA LIKES THE THOUGHT.

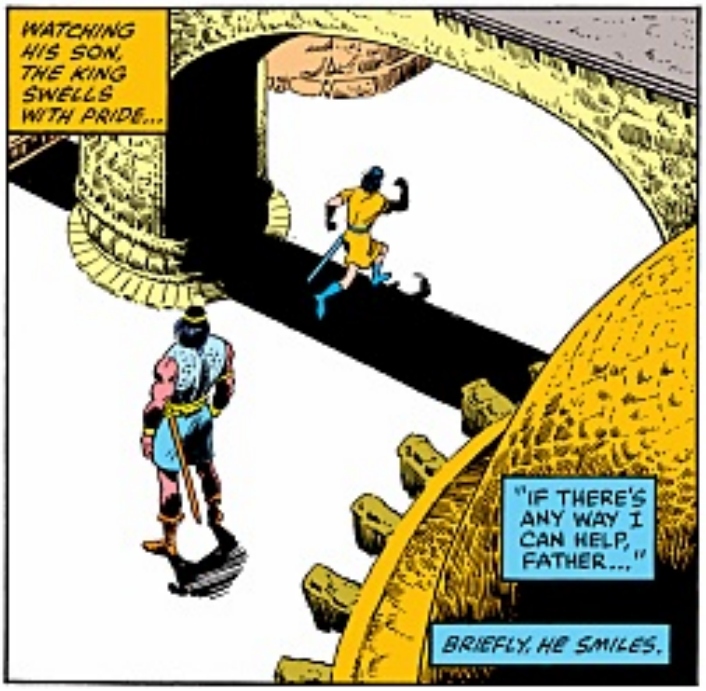
WHY NOT?--AS LONG AS HE MAKES THE EFFORT TO COME TO US. AFTER ALL--
--OUR PRESENTLY DEVISED TACTICS... HAVE BEGUN TO BORE ME.
SHE SNAPS HER FINGERS, ONCE, LIGHTLY.
AND THE CARD-HOUSE COLLAPSES INTO A PERFECT DECK.

NOW EVEN THE KUSHITE WARMS TO THE BOLD NOTION...
AYE -- WE CAN WAGER ON THE OUTCOME!
THE FIRST ONE OF US TO SKIN HIS BONES... WINS THE PRIZE!
OTHER THAN THE SOURCE OF POWER AQUILONIA REPRESENTS FOR THREE SUCH AS US?
AND THE PRIZE, JUMBASSA?-- OTHER THAN AQUILONIA, THAT IS...
WHY NOT YOUR SYGHT CRYSTAL, SCYLLANA--?
URAZAI AND I HAVE BOTH LUSTED AFTER IT FOR AGES...
YES... SUCH A PRIZE WOULD BE AGREEABLE TO ME.
AND IF I WIN, BROTHER SORCERERS? WHAT PRIZE, THEN, DO I TAKE?
SATISFACTION, SCYLLANA... THAT YOUR LONG BOREDOM HAS COME TO AN END.
FOR JUMBASSA, THERE IS MORE THAN HUMOR IN THE KHITAIN MAGE'S WORDS...
...AND AS HE ROARS, THE ENTIRE CHAMBER SEEMS TO QUAKE.
THERE IS, APPARENTLY, A VAST AND MYSTIC POWER OF DARK MIRTH...
SCYLLANA MERELY SMILES, ALREADY DREAMING OF A DIFFERENT PRIZE--A PRIZE OF STRONG FLESH AND BRIGHT BLOOD.


TARANTIA: WALLED CAPITAL OF AQUILONIA, MIGHTIEST NATION OF THE HYBORIAN AGE...
...AND A SUPREMELY CIVILIZED KINGDOM NOW RULED BY A CIMMERIAN--A NORTHLANDS BARBARIAN NAMED CONAN.
IS SOMETHING WRONG, FATHER? YOU'RE NOT EVEN PAYING ATTENTION TO THIS INSPECTION OF THE IRON LEGION--AND THESE MEN ARE THE BLACK DRAGONS, YOUR ELITE PERSONAL GUARD...
IT'S NOTHING, CONN... JUST THAT I'M STILL FRETTING OVER THE RECENT ATTACKS ON ME--ON US--AND THE PALACE...

CROM KNOWS I CAN'T GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THIS SHADOWY REBELLION...
BUT FATHER--YOU'VE DONE A GOOD JOB OF EXPOSING AND DEFEATING EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING THAT'S COME AT YOU THUS FAR.
AYE, BUT THEY WERE JUST THE SMALL FRY, CONN. I'M STILL NO CLOSER TO KNOWING ANYTHING ABOUT THE REAL POWERS--THE BIG FISH--BEHIND ALL THE LESSER ATTACKS.

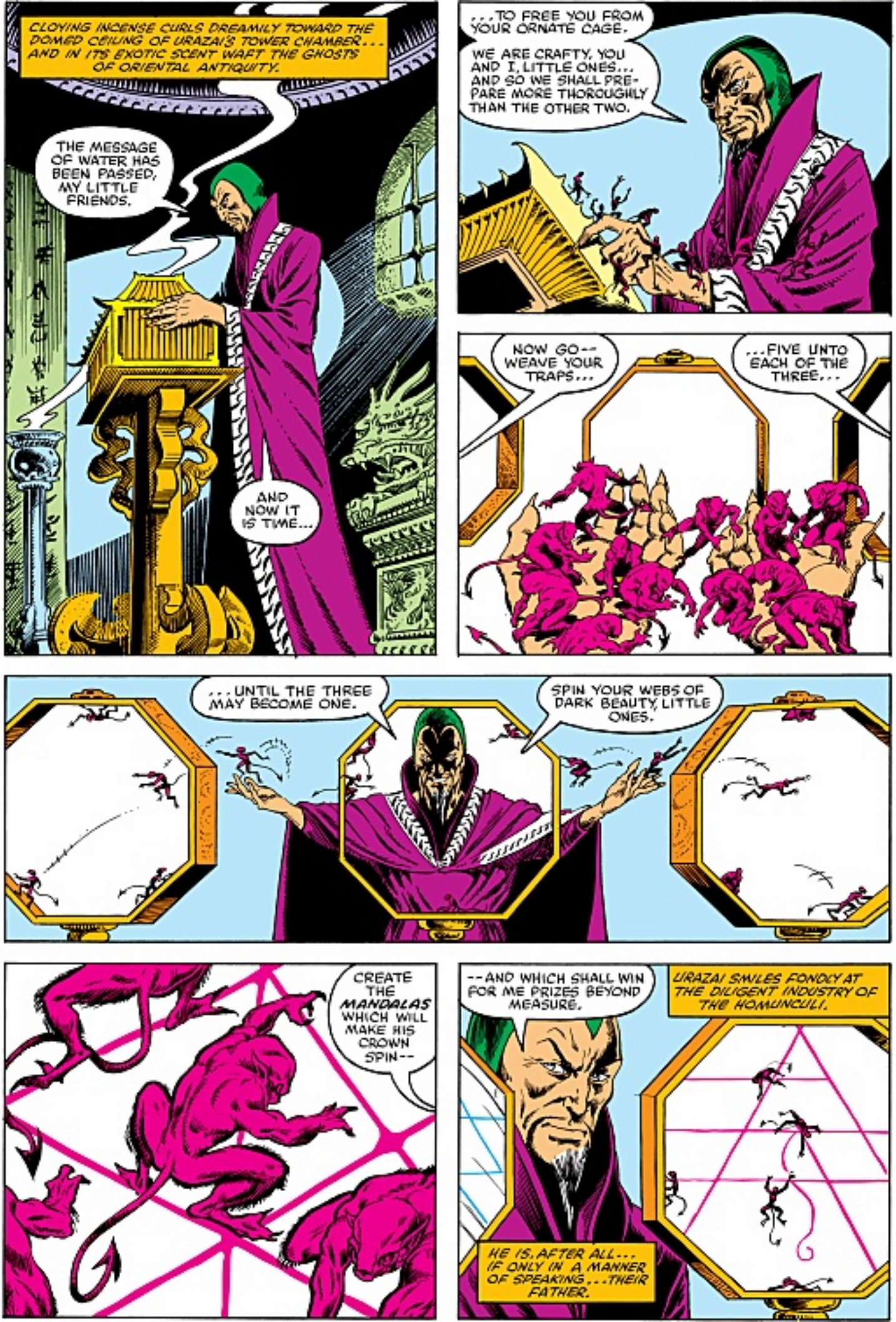
IF THERE'S ANY WAY I CAN HELP, FATHER...
NO, SON.
JUST RUN ALONG AND ESCORT YOUR MOTHER TO SUPPER--I'LL BE ALONG AFTER I WORRY THE MATTER A TRIFLE LONGER.


WATCHING HIS SON, THE KING SWELLS WITH PRIDE...
"IF THERE'S ANY WAY I CAN HELP, FATHER..."
BRIEFLY, HE SMILES.

THEN HE SETS OFF, PACING TO BURN AWAY THE TENSIONS OF HIS MIND, MUTTERING DARKLY TO HIMSELF...
"HELP!" TRUTH IS, EVEN WITH ALL THE HELP OF CROM, MITRA, AND ISHTAR, THIS IS ONE PROBLEM THAT MIGHT NEVER BE SOLVED...

WORSE YET, MAYHAP IT'LL BE SOLVED AGAINST MY FAVOR-- WITH A DAGGER FINDING ITS FINAL HOME IN MY BACK!
IT IS NOT OFTEN THAT THE KING WALKS THIS POOR QUARTER OF THE CITY, AND THE PEOPLE HE PASSES STIFFEN WITH ASTONISHMENT... YET NO ONE SPEAKS, OR EVEN LOOKS TOO BOLDLY IN HIS DIRECTION...
...FOR CONAN'S TEMPER, AND HIS TOWERING STRENGTH, ARE LEGEND.
CROM CURSE ME-- OR LAUGH AT ME-- FOR DARING TO LUST AFTER THIS BINDING CROWN.
CROWNS ARE FOR STATUES OF DEAD MEN-- OR FOR LIVING FOOLS, SOON TO BE DEAD.
THE FACE IN THE CISTERN STARES BACK MOCKINGLY...
...THEN SCATTERS TO A GROTESQUE MASK AS THE CISTERN TREMBLES AND THE WATER RIPPLES...
MITRA AND ISHTAR! WHAT IS--
...FINALLY TO BE USURPED BY A NEW FACE.
KNOW, CONAN, THAT I AM URAZAI-- ONE OF THREE MAGES RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ATTEMPTS ON YOUR LIFE AND THRONE.
EH--?! BUT... BUT WHY?
AQUILONIA IS A SITE OF AWESOME MYSTICAL IMPORT. IN ITS SOIL AND STONES, IN THE VERY AIR ABOVE IT, LIES THE KEY TO A POWER YOU COULD NEVER HOPE TO COMPREHEND.
INDEED, IF ALL THE WORLD'S SORCERERS KNEW OF IT...
...YOU WOULD SWIFTLY FACE ENOUGH TROUBLE TO MAKE THE CROWN LEAP OFF YOUR HEAD...

AS FOR NOW, SINCE OUR INDIRECT CONFLICT HAS GROWN WEARISOME, WHY NOT SIMPLY COME TO US AND END THE GAME CLEANLY?-- LEST WE CONTINUE OUR HARRYING UNTIL YOU FINALLY WEAKEN AND FOLD.
AYE, I'LL COME TO YOU, BY CROM! WHERE--?
IN REPLY, THE WATER-FACE MELTS-- AND THE SURFACE OF THE CISTERN IS AGAIN WHIPPED TO A FRENZY...
WWHOOOOOOSSSHHH!
...THIS TIME BY A HOWLING WIND...
...A WIND WHICH BLOWS AN ANCIENT PARCHMENT STRAIGHT TOWARD THE GRIM FACE OF THE KING.
A MAP--?
HE SNATCHES IT.
A CIRCLED ISLE-- WHERE NO ISLE EXISTS! I PLIED THOSE WATERS FOR YEARS, WITH BÊLIT AND OTHER PIRATES, AND SAW NAUGHT BUT WAVES AT THAT SITE!
Zingara
Barachan Isles
Isle of Black Ones
YET, IF IT'S AN ISLE OF SORCERY...MAYHAP IT'S INVISIBLE TO THOSE WITHOUT INVITATION.
A TRAP, NO DOUBT-- BUT I WILL RISK IT JUST TO END THIS CONSTANT WORRY!
AND AFTER THE TROUBLE I HAD THE LAST TIME I DECIDED TO GO OFF ALONE, I'D BEST TELL NO ONE OF MY INTENTIONS--
--INCLUDING MY WIFE, ZENOBIA...UNTIL IT'S FAR TOO LATE FOR HER TO OBJECT.
AND SO, AFTER SLIPPING QUICKLY IN AND OUT OF THE PALACE, CONAN SELECTS HIS FAVORITE MOUNT FROM THE ROYAL STABLE...
YOUNG CONN WAS LOOKING FOR YOU, MY KING--THEY'RE WAITING SUPPER.
THANKS...
...BUT I'VE A HUNGER FOR SOMETHING OTHER THAN FOOD--
--AND IT'LL BE SATISFIED ONLY AT THE END OF A LONG JOURNEY.
WH-WHATEVER YOU SAY, MY KING.


CLOYING INCENSE CURLS DREAMILY TOWARD THE DOMED CEILING OF URAZAI'S TOWER CHAMBER... AND IN ITS EXOTIC SCENT WAFT THE GHOSTS OF ORIENTAL ANTIQUITY.
THE MESSAGE OF WATER HAS BEEN PASSED, MY LITTLE FRIENDS.
AND NOW IT IS TIME...
...TO FREE YOU FROM YOUR ORNATE CAGE.
WE ARE CRAFTY, YOU AND I, LITTLE ONES... AND SO WE SHALL PREPARE MORE THOROUGHLY THAN THE OTHER TWO.
NOW GO-- WEAVE YOUR TRAPS...
...FIVE UNTO EACH OF THE THREE...
...UNTIL THE THREE MAY BECOME ONE.
SPIN YOUR WEBS OF DARK BEAUTY, LITTLE ONES.
CREATE THE MANDALAS WHICH WILL MAKE HIS CROWN SPIN--
--AND WHICH SHALL WIN FOR ME PRIZES BEYOND MEASURE.
URAZAI SMILES FONDLY AT THE DILIGENT INDUSTRY OF THE HOMUNCULI.
HE IS, AFTER ALL... IF ONLY IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING... THEIR FATHER.

SHAFTS OF STRONG EASTERN SUN BRIGHTEN QUEEN ZENOBIA'S MORNING BATH...
I WORRY ABOUT CONAN, SHAREEN-- HE WASN'T IN BED WHEN I AWOKE...
DO YOU KNOW WHERE HE COULD BE?
I AM SORRY, ZENOBIA, BUT I HAVE NOT SEEN THE KING SINCE--
EH--? MY QUEEN! A PARCHMENT IN YOUR BATH CRYSTALS...!
A PARCHMENT?
LET ME SEE THAT, SHAREEN... AND IF IT'S WHAT I THINK IT IS...
IT IS.
ZENOBIA-- GONE FISHING. BIG CATCH PLANNED. MAY BE GONE A WHILE-- DON'T WORRY. CONAN
CURSE HIS THICK BARBARIAN HIDE!!
FETCH TROCERO AND PROSPERO AT ONCE, SHAREEN-- AND INFORM THEM THAT THE KINGDOM IS ONCE AGAIN WITHOUT ITS KING!
A-AT ONCE, ZENOBIA-- I WILL DO AS YOU SAY.

THAT NIGHT, IN THE SOUTHEASTERN QUARTER OF THE CITY, SKULKING FIGURES SHUFFLE THROUGH SHADOWS...
I STILL DON'T SEE WHY WE HAVE TO HIDE THEM.
WEAPONS ARE FOR THE SPILLING OF BLOOD--NOT FOR STORAGE IN SOME FOUL CELLAR!

AYE--PATIENCE, THEY COUNSEL... BUT HOW LONG WILL WE HAVE TO WAIT BEFORE MOVING ON THAT CURSED BARBARIAN KING?

MOREOVER AND MORE IMPORTANTLY, MY FRIEND, HOW LONG WILL WE HAVE TO WAIT BEFORE OUR NEXT PAYMENT?
STILL, THEY'VE PAID US WELL THUS FAR...
...SO I GUESS WE'LL JUST HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL--

THREE DAYS AT THE LEAST, REBELS, AND FIVE AT THE MOST, HASTEN YOUR PREPARATIONS FOR THE REBELLION.
IT...IT'S THEM--FORMING FROM THE WALL!
BUT ALREADY THE FACES BEGIN TO FADE, BLENDING INTO PITTED STONE.

AND AT THAT MOMENT, FAR TO THE SOUTH...
CROM CURSE ME FOR BEING AN IMPATIENT FOOL!

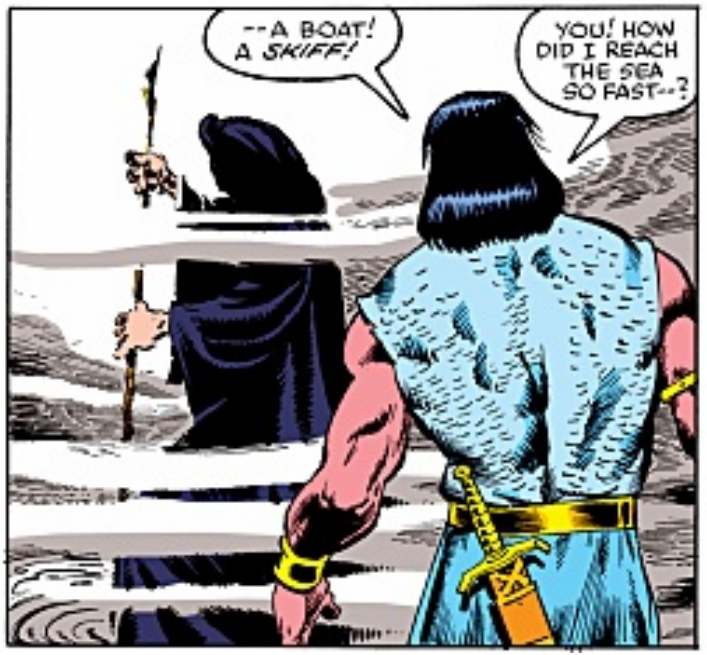
I'VE RIDDEN YOU NIGH UNTO DEATH, HAVEN'T I? BUT YOUR PACE, AT LEAST, HAS BOUGHT YOU FREEDOM--YOU'RE NO USE TO ME NOW.
WITH LUCK, YOU'LL RECOVER YOUR STRENGTH IN A DAY OR SO, AND GRAZE YOUR WAY BACK HOME...

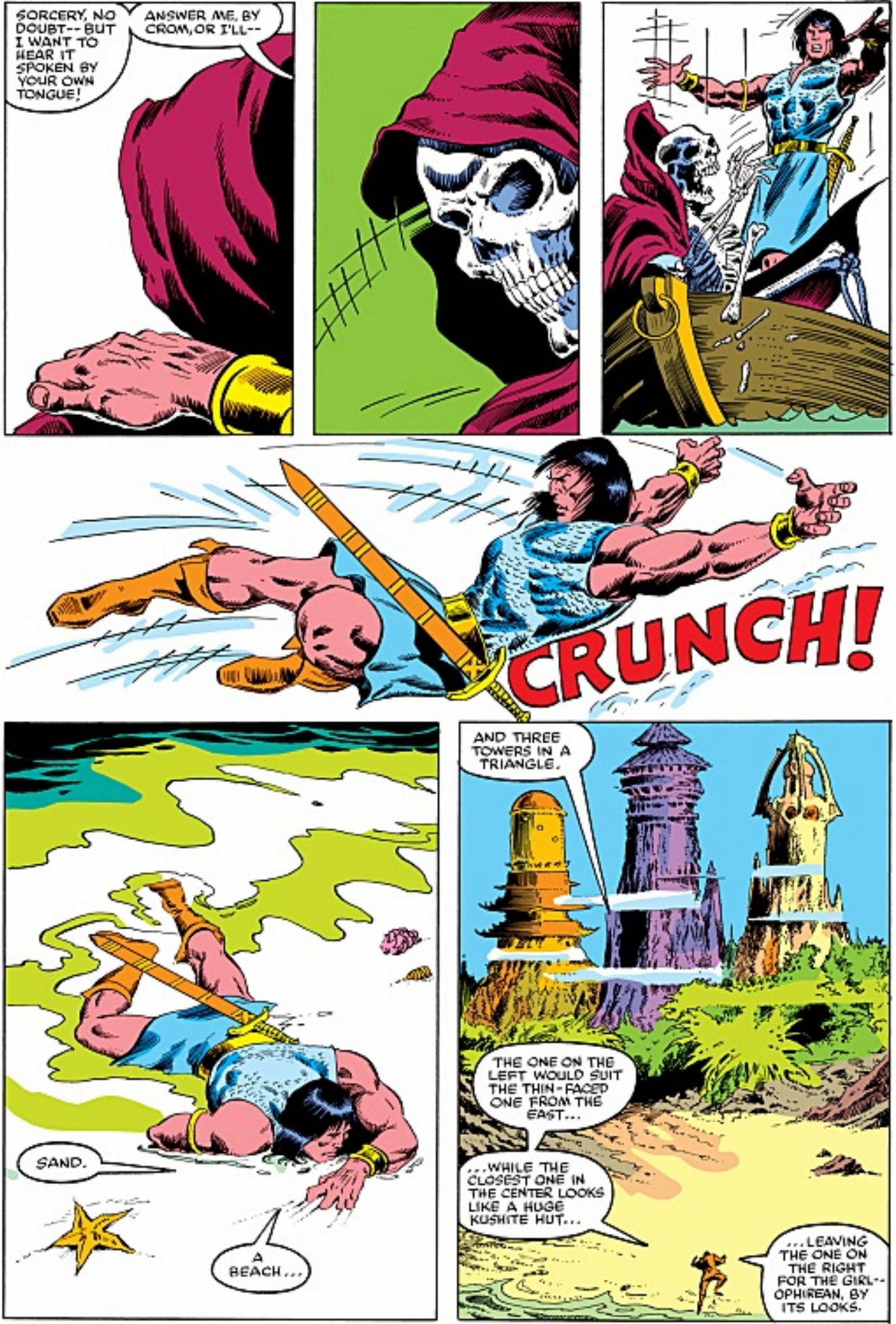
AS FOR ME, ON FOOT... FOOL THAT I AM... IT'LL TAKE WEEKS JUST TO REACH THE SEA...
...THEN DAYS MORE BEFORE I COME WITHIN SIGHT OF THIS NONEXISTENT ISLE!
NOT SO, BARBARIAN KING.
EH--?!
LIKE YOU, WE HAVE SHORT PATIENCE FOR LONG JOURNEYS.
INDEED, URAZAI EXCEEDED HIS AUTHORITY THE MOMENT HE PRESENTED YOU WITH THAT MAP...

MITRA AND ISHTAR!

JUMBASSA IS RIGHT, CONAN OF AQUILONIA --YOU WON'T BE NEEDING THIS PARCHMENT...
...AND YET WE SHALL MEET IN THE FLESH VERY SOON. UNTIL THEN, THINK UPON THE GENTLE TOUCH OF SLENDER FINGERS...
THE MAP-FACE FLARES BRIGHTER--

--AND IS THEN SUCKED AWAY AT TREMENDOUS SPEED, STOLEN BY A SUDDEN SWIRL OF GHOSTLY FOG.
I'VE SEEN ALL THREE OF THEM NOW--THE THIN-FACED ONE IN THE WATER, THE BROAD-FACED KUSHITE IN THE DIRT... AND THE WOMAN OF FLAME.
I EVEN KNOW THEIR NAMES AND--
EH--? THE GROUND-- PITCHING AND YAWING UNDER MY FEET ...LIKE A--


--A BOAT! A SKIFF!
YOU! HOW DID I REACH THE SEA SO FAST--?


SORCERY, NO DOUBT-- BUT I WANT TO HEAR IT SPOKEN BY YOUR OWN TONGUE!
ANSWER ME, BY CROM, OR I'LL--
CRUNCH!
SAND.
A BEACH...
AND THREE TOWERS IN A TRIANGLE.
THE ONE ON THE LEFT WOULD SUIT THE THIN-FACED ONE FROM THE EAST...
...WHILE THE CLOSEST ONE IN THE CENTER LOOKS LIKE A HUGE KUSHITE HUT...
...LEAVING THE ONE ON THE RIGHT FOR THE GIRL-- OPHIREAN, BY ITS LOOKS.

THEN THE ISLE EXISTS -- AND BY THEIR MAGICKS I'VE REACHED IT.
STILL A TRAP, NO DOUBT, BUT AT LEAST NOW I -- MY EYES!
THE RISING SUN AT HIS BACK REACHES THE BEATEN GOLD OF URAZAI'S TOWER DOME, DAZZLING BACK LIKE SPEARS OF FIRE.

CAN'T SEE A THING UNTIL THESE CURSED SPOTS FADE...
GRRRRRRRRRR

STRONG SHAPES MOVING ALMOST SILENTLY -- SAVE FOR THEIR OCCASIONAL GROWLS.

NOTHING TO DO BUT HACK IN EVERY DIRECTION I SENSE MOVE-MENT...
BUT WHAT ARE THEY? DEMONS? LIONS--?

AYE -- THEY'RE LIONS, TRUE TO THEIR SOUND!
I CAN SEE THEM NOW!

BUT I, MYSELF, WAS ONCE CALLED AMRA THE LION...
...A NAME I SHALL NOW MORE THAN LIVE UP TO!

A WASTE OF TIME-- I CAME HERE TO TRADE BLOWS WITH SORCERY, NOT NATURAL BEASTS!
STILL, THE SORCERY WILL COME SOON ENOUGH--
--WHEN I ATTACK THE CLOSEST TOWER!

REACHING THE FIRST OF THE THREE TOWERS, CONAN BEGINS CLIMBING WITH THE SURE STRENGTH AND SWIFT EASE OF THE CIMMERIAN HILLMAN HE IS...
ZENOBIA AND TROCERO WOULD FAULT MY TACTICS, NO DOUBT, AS BEING TOO DIRECT...BUT CROM KNOWS I'M GETTING TOO OLD TO WASTE TIME ON DEVIOUS PLANNING.
BEST TO JUST GET IT OVER WITH--AND NOT REST UNTIL I'VE SEEN THE THIRD AND FINAL WIZARD'S HEAD BOUNCE ON THE GROUND-- SO I CAN RETURN TO MY WIFE AND SON WITH MY MIND FREED OF WORRY.
HMP. I WONDER IF ZENOBIA FOUND MY MESSAGE IN HER BATH CRYS--

SHREEEE
CROM'S BLOOD! NOW THEY HURL WINGED FIENDS AT ME!

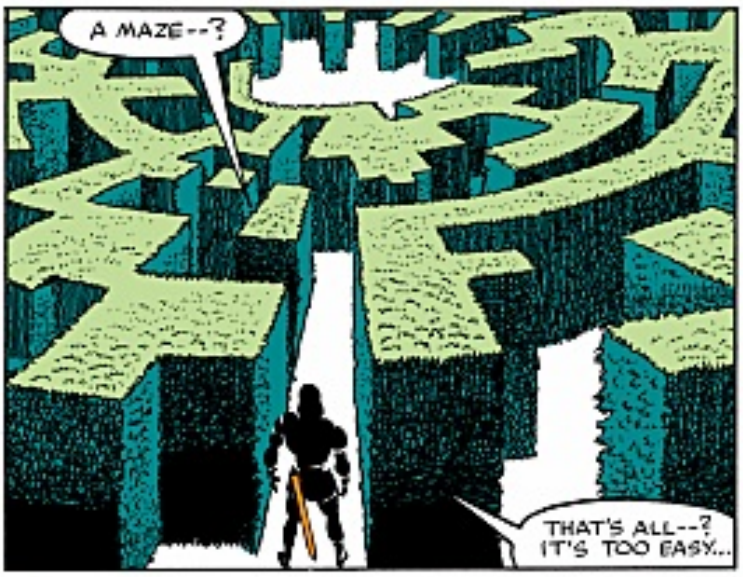
I'VE GOT MY SIGHT FULLY BACK...
...BUT NOW I'VE A HANDI-CAP OF ONE ARM...
...AND NO FEET.

AAIIEEEE
I'LL SAY THIS MUCH FOR YOUR VILE MASTERS...

THEY'RE HARDLY MAKING THE DIRECT APPROACH EASY!

SRREEEE
KREEEEEEEE
BUT THEN, I'VE ALSO SOMETHING TO SAY FOR MYSELF...
I WILL NOT BE DENIED!!

AND AS THE LAST FIEND FALLS WITH A SNAP OF LEATHERN WINGS, CONAN GAINS THE TOWER...
NOW TO FIND THE WIZARD JUMBASSA... BUT WHERE?
THIS SINGLE HUT IS LARGER THAN A DOZEN KUSHITE VILLAGES...
...AND SURELY IT'LL HOLD MORE THAN JUMBASSA.


A MAZE--?
THAT'S ALL--? IT'S TOO EASY..

SURELY A WIZARD WOULD BLOCK MY PATH WITH MORE THAN LIONS, INEFFECTUAL WINGED CREATURES, AND CRAZILY CUT SHRUBS...
CAUTIOUSLY, CONAN ENTERS THE MAZE AT ITS NEAREST OPENING, TURNING ITS VERDANT CORNERS FIRST THIS WAY, THEN THAT...

...UNTIL--
IT WAS TOO EASY. THERE IS NO WAY OUT OF THE MAZE. IT LEADS TO NAUGHT BUT DEAD-ENDS.
A TRICK, THEN... A TRAP.
BUT WHAT AWAITS TO SPRING THE TRAP SHUT--?

KUSHITE BLOOD-DRINKERS!
CANNIBAL VAMPIRES!

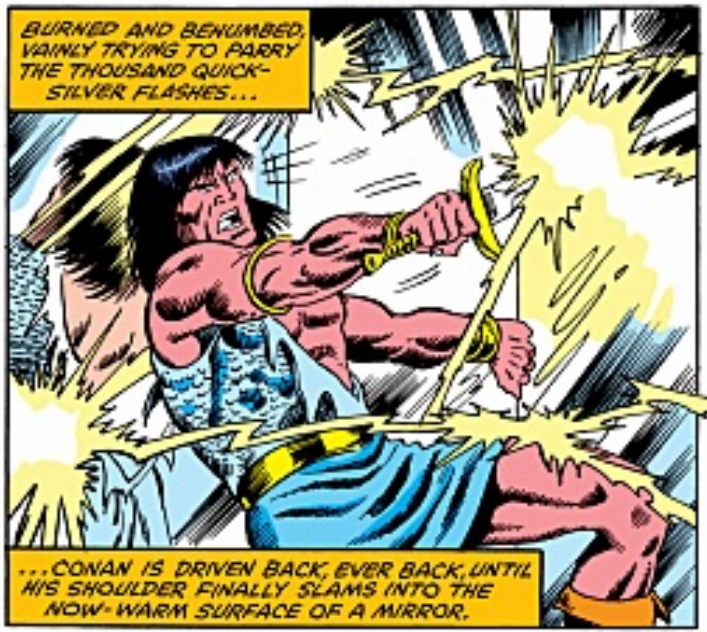
THEY SWARM OVER HIM, STRAINING FOR HIS FLESH AND BLOOD WITH CRACKED TALONS AND SHARP FANGS...
HE SUFFERS A DOZEN PAINFUL WOUNDS -- BUT STILL HE WHIRLS AND SLASHES, UNTIL HIS BROADSWORD HUMS THROUGH A SCARLET MIST...
AND WHEN THE LAST ONE HAS CRUMPLED INTO THE GREATER SPRAWL, THE ENTIRE HEAP SHIMMERS...AND FADES.
THEN I HAVE BEEN FIGHTING SORCERY... ALL ALONG.
EVEN THE LIONS FADED, NO DOUBT, AS SOON AS I TURNED AWAY FROM THEM.
NOW, AS FOR THIS CURSED MAZE...
...IT'S TIME I RETURNED TO THE DIRECT APPROACH...
...UNTIL I'VE CUT MY WAY THROUGH IT!
A FLURRY OF SHREDDED LEAVES...
...AND DEAD-END BECOMES DARK ENTRANCE-WAY...
DARK, THAT IS, UNTIL CONAN ENTERS--
--TRIGGERING LIGHTS WHICH STARTLE HIM WITH MYRIAD IMAGES OF HIMSELF.
MIRRORS--?!
BUT WHY? HOW CAN MERE LOOKING GLASS HARM ANY-ONE?

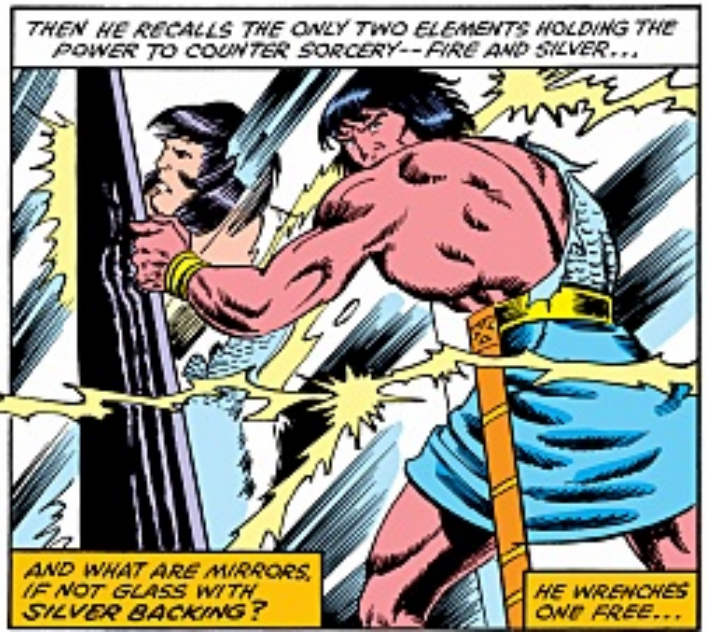
AGH-H!
LIGHTNING--BOUNCING OFF THE GLASS--RIPPING AT ME!

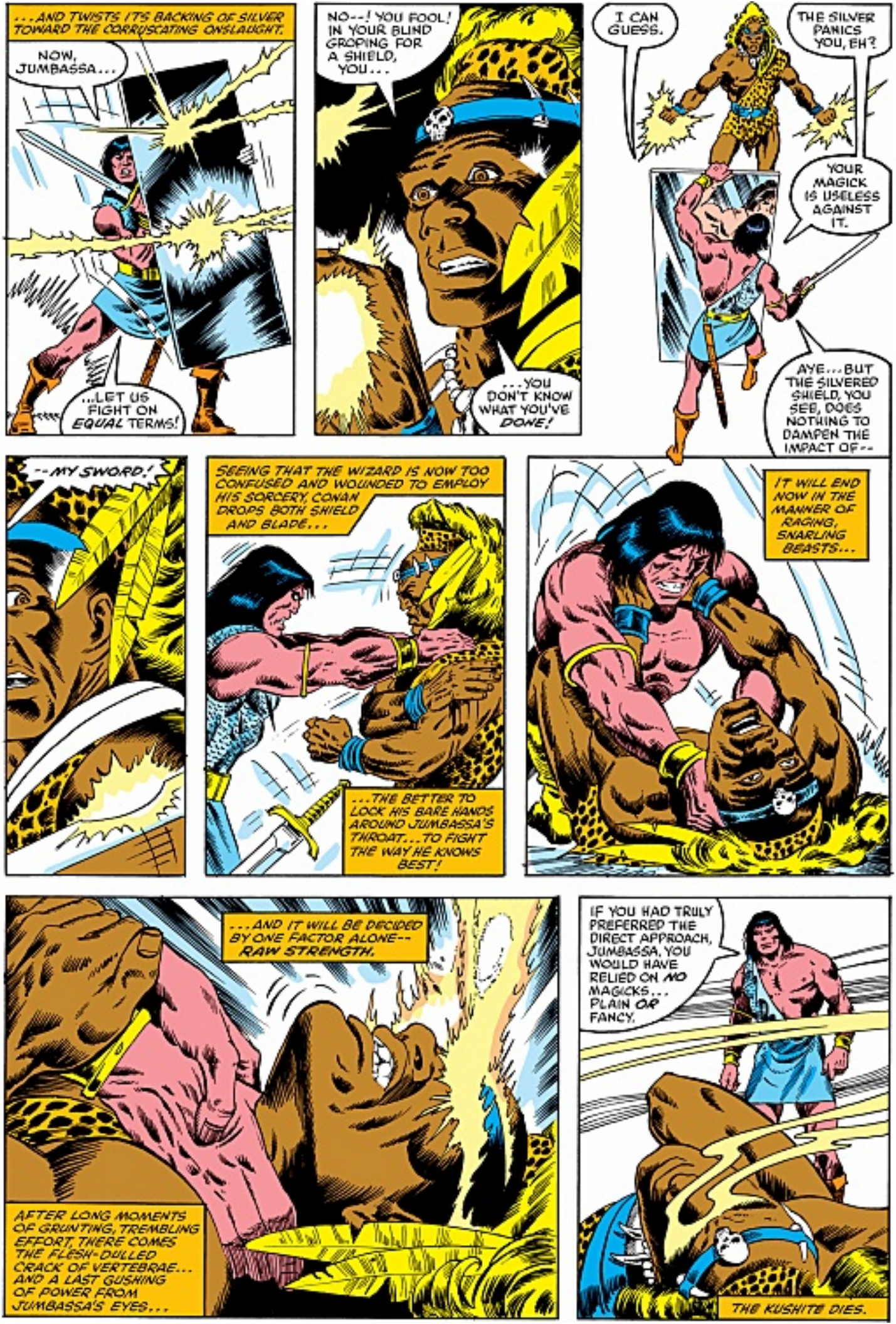
INDEED, BARBARIAN KING... FOR, LIKE YOU, I PREFER THE DIRECT APPROACH.
MY MAGICKING IS NEVER DEVIOUS, NOR EVEN ORNATE IN ITS STYLE OR CONSTRUCTS...
IT IS SIMPLY... DEVASTATING.

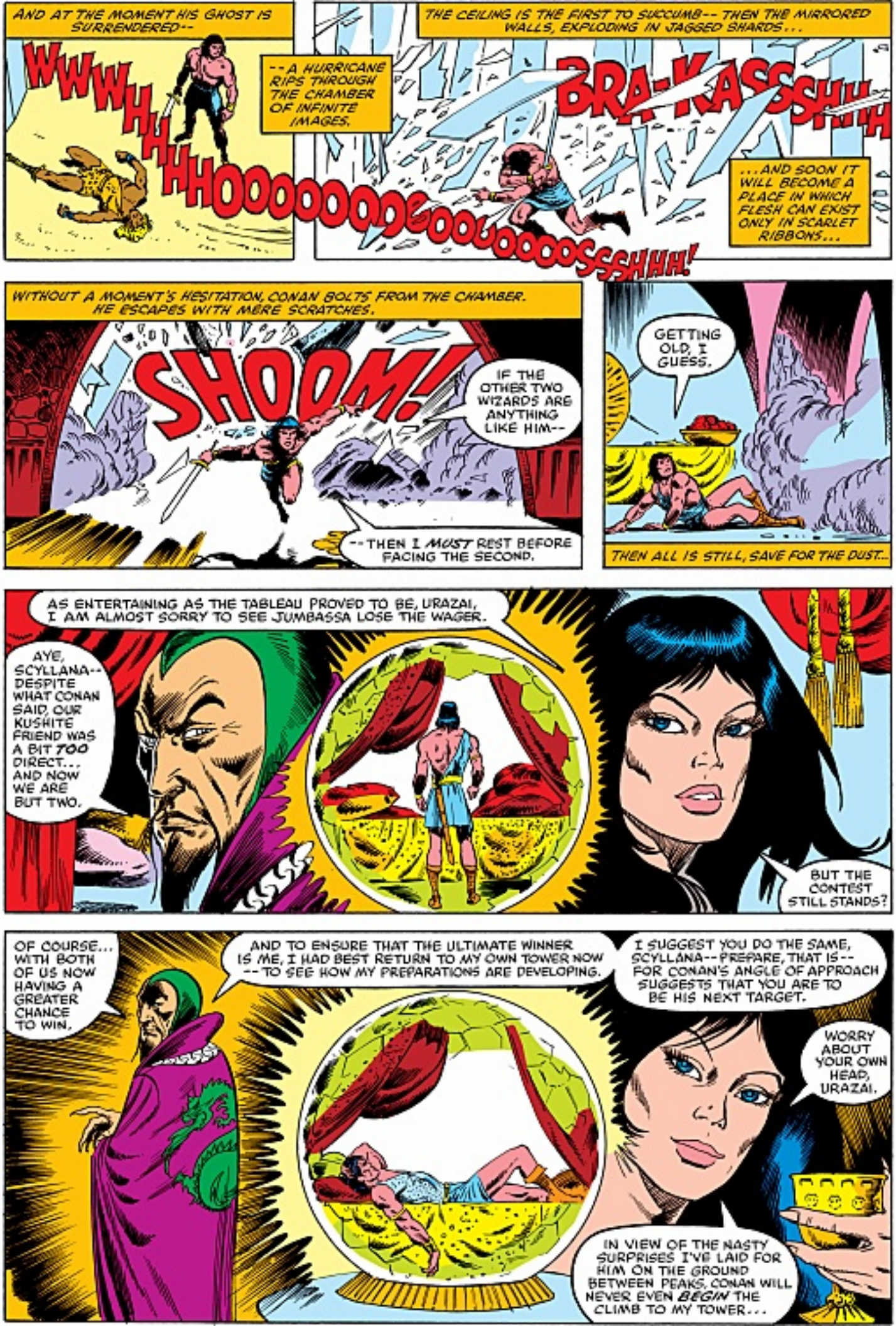
NO--NOT LIGHTNING--BUT SORCEROUS ENERGY!
RAW BOLTS OF NAKED MAGICKAL POWER!

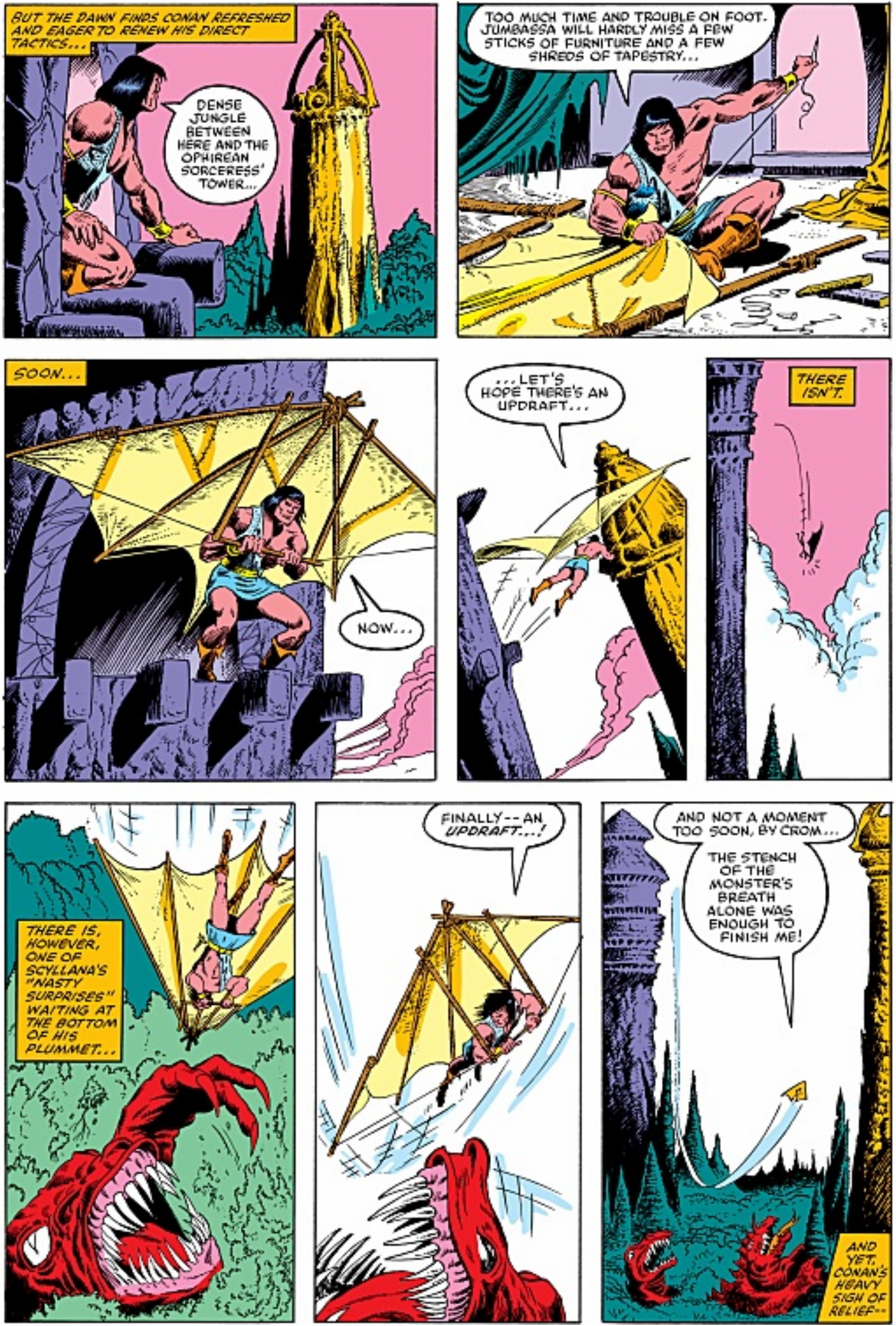
THEREFORE, BARBARIAN KING, PREPARE YOURSELF TO BE DEVASTATED!
AND JUMBASSA'S MAGIC RIPPLES AND REBOUNDS THROUGH THE HALL OF MIRRORS, UNTIL THE ENTIRE CHAMBER IS LIKE THE SIZZLING HEART OF A STORM.

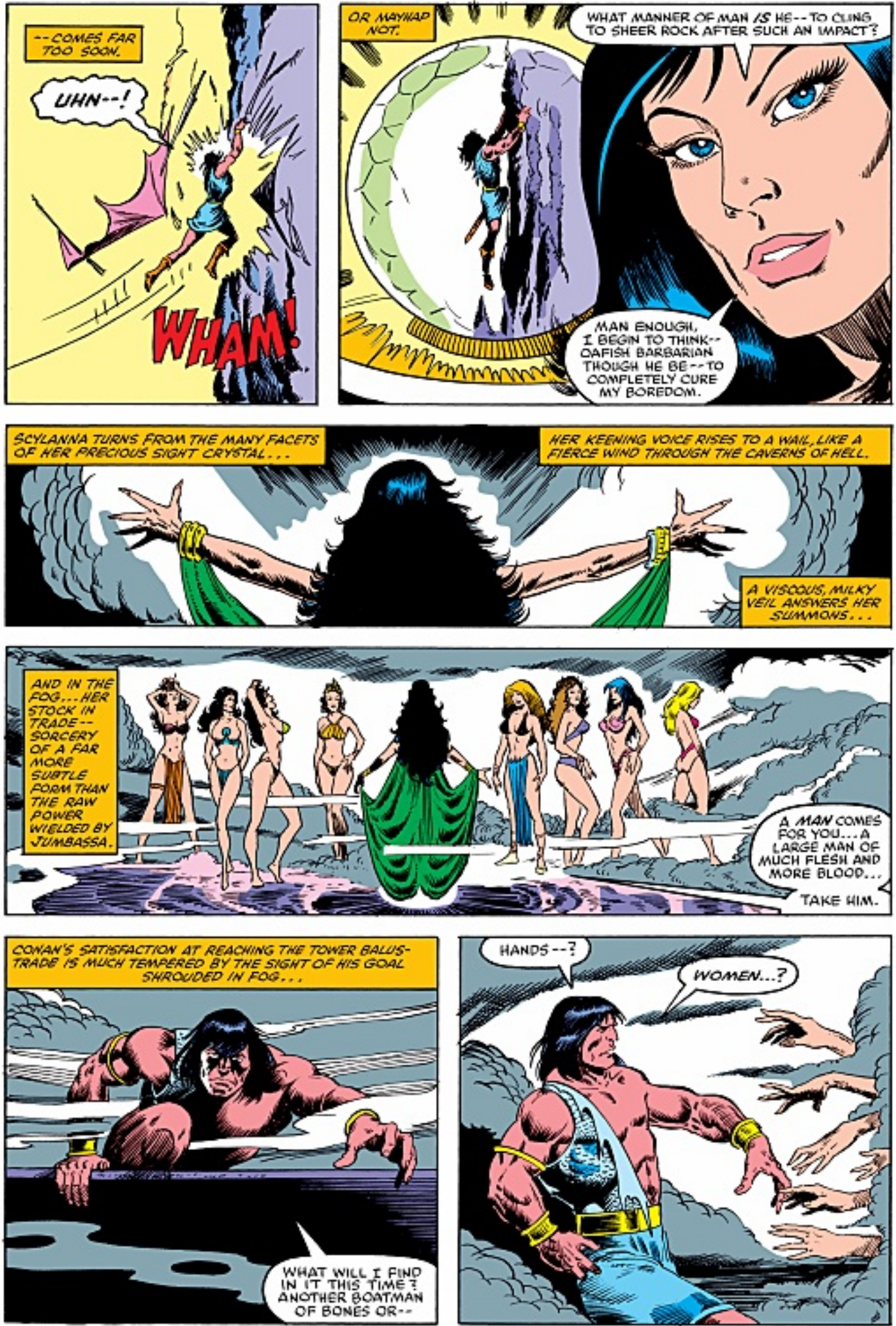

BURNED AND BENUMBED, VAINLY TRYING TO PARRY THE THOUSAND QUICK-SILVER FLASHES...
...CONAN IS DRIVEN BACK, EVER BACK, UNTIL HIS SHOULDER FINALLY SLAMS INTO THE NOW-WARM SURFACE OF A MIRROR.


THEN HE RECALLS THE ONLY TWO ELEMENTS HOLDING THE POWER TO COUNTER SORCERY--FIRE AND SILVER...
AND WHAT ARE MIRRORS, IF NOT GLASS WITH SILVER BACKING?
HE WRENCHES ONE FREE...


...AND TWISTS IT'S BACKING OF SILVER TOWARD THE CORRUSCATING ONSLAUGHT.
NOW, JUMBASSA...
...LET US FIGHT ON EQUAL TERMS!
NO--! YOU FOOL! IN YOUR BLIND GROPING FOR A SHIELD, YOU...
...YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE!
I CAN GUESS.
THE SILVER PANICS YOU, EH?
YOUR MAGICK IS USELESS AGAINST IT.
AYE...BUT THE SILVERED SHIELD, YOU SEE, DOES NOTHING TO DAMPEN THE IMPACT OF--
--MY SWORD!
SEEING THAT THE WIZARD IS NOW TOO CONFUSED AND WOUNDED TO EMPLOY HIS SORCERY, CONAN DROPS BOTH SHIELD AND BLADE...
...THE BETTER TO LOCK HIS BARE HANDS AROUND JUMBASSA'S THROAT...TO FIGHT THE WAY HE KNOWS BEST!
IT WILL END NOW IN THE MANNER OF RAGING, SNARLING BEASTS...
...AND IT WILL BE DECIDED BY ONE FACTOR ALONE-- RAW STRENGTH.
AFTER LONG MOMENTS OF GRUNTING, TREMBLING EFFORT, THERE COMES THE FLESH-DULLED CRACK OF VERTEBRAE... AND A LAST GUSHING OF POWER FROM JUMBASSA'S EYES...
IF YOU HAD TRULY PREFERRED THE DIRECT APPROACH, JUMBASSA, YOU WOULD HAVE RELIED ON NO MAGICKS... PLAIN OR FANCY.
THE KUSHITE DIES.


AND AT THE MOMENT HIS GHOST IS SURRENDERED--
WWWHHHHHOOO

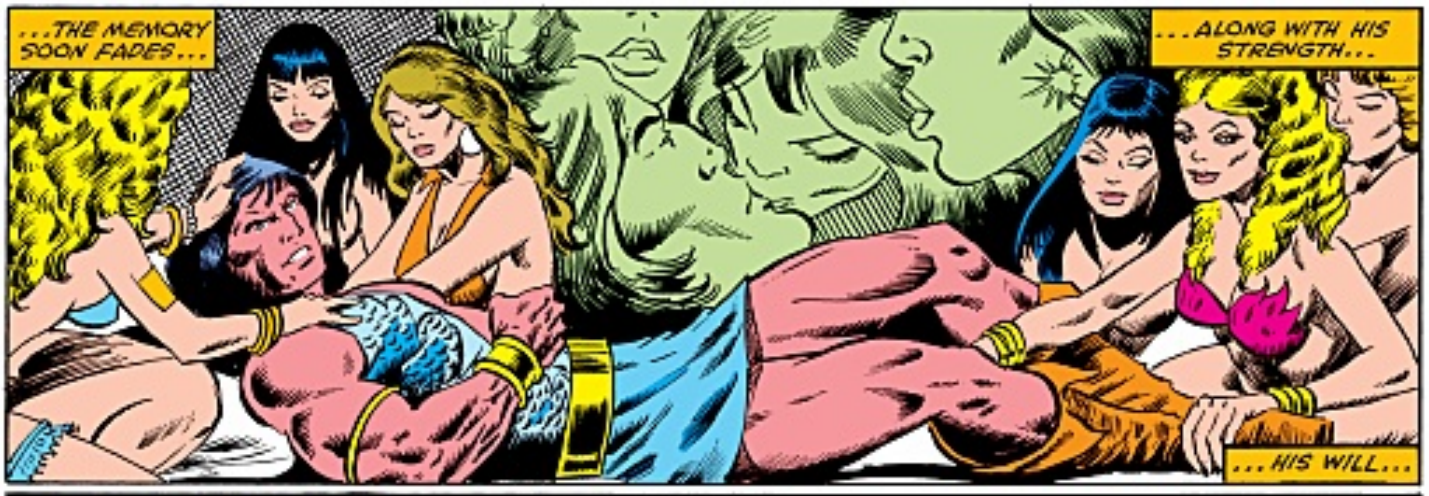

BUT THE DAWN FINDS CONAN REFRESHED AND EAGER TO RENEW HIS DIRECT TACTICS...
DENSE JUNGLE BETWEEN HERE AND THE OPHIREAN SORCERESS' TOWER...
TOO MUCH TIME AND TROUBLE ON FOOT. JUMBASSA WILL HARDLY MISS A FEW STICKS OF FURNITURE AND A FEW SHREDS OF TAPESTRY...
SOON...
NOW...
...LET'S HOPE THERE'S AN UPDRAFT...
THERE ISN'T.
THERE IS, HOWEVER, ONE OF SCYLLANA'S "NASTY SURPRISES" WAITING AT THE BOTTOM OF HIS PLUMMET...
FINALLY--AN UPDRAFT...!
AND NOT A MOMENT TOO SOON, BY CROM...
THE STENCH OF THE MONSTER'S BREATH ALONE WAS ENOUGH TO FINISH ME!
AND YET, CONAN'S HEAVY SIGH OF RELIEF...


--COMES FAR TOO SOON.
UHN--!
WHAM!
OR MAYHAP NOT.
WHAT MANNER OF MAN IS HE--TO CLING TO SHEER ROCK AFTER SUCH AN IMPACT?
MAN ENOUGH, I BEGIN TO THINK--DAFISH BARBARIAN THOUGH HE BE--TO COMPLETELY CURE MY BOREDOM.
SCYLANNA TURNS FROM THE MANY FACETS OF HER PRECIOUS SIGHT CRYSTAL...
HER KEENING VOICE RISES TO A WAIL, LIKE A FIERCE WIND THROUGH THE CAVERNS OF HELL.
A VISCOUS, MILKY VEIL ANSWERS HER SUMMONS...
AND IN THE FOG...HER STOCK IN TRADE--SORCERY OF A FAR MORE SUBTLE FORM THAN THE RAW POWER WIELDED BY JUMBASSA.
A MAN COMES FOR YOU...A LARGE MAN OF MUCH FLESH AND MORE BLOOD...
TAKE HIM.
CONAN'S SATISFACTION AT REACHING THE TOWER BALUSTRADE IS MUCH TEMPERED BY THE SIGHT OF HIS GOAL SHROUDED IN FOG...
WHAT WILL I FIND IN IT THIS TIME? ANOTHER BOATMAN OF BONES OR--
HANDS--?
WOMEN...?

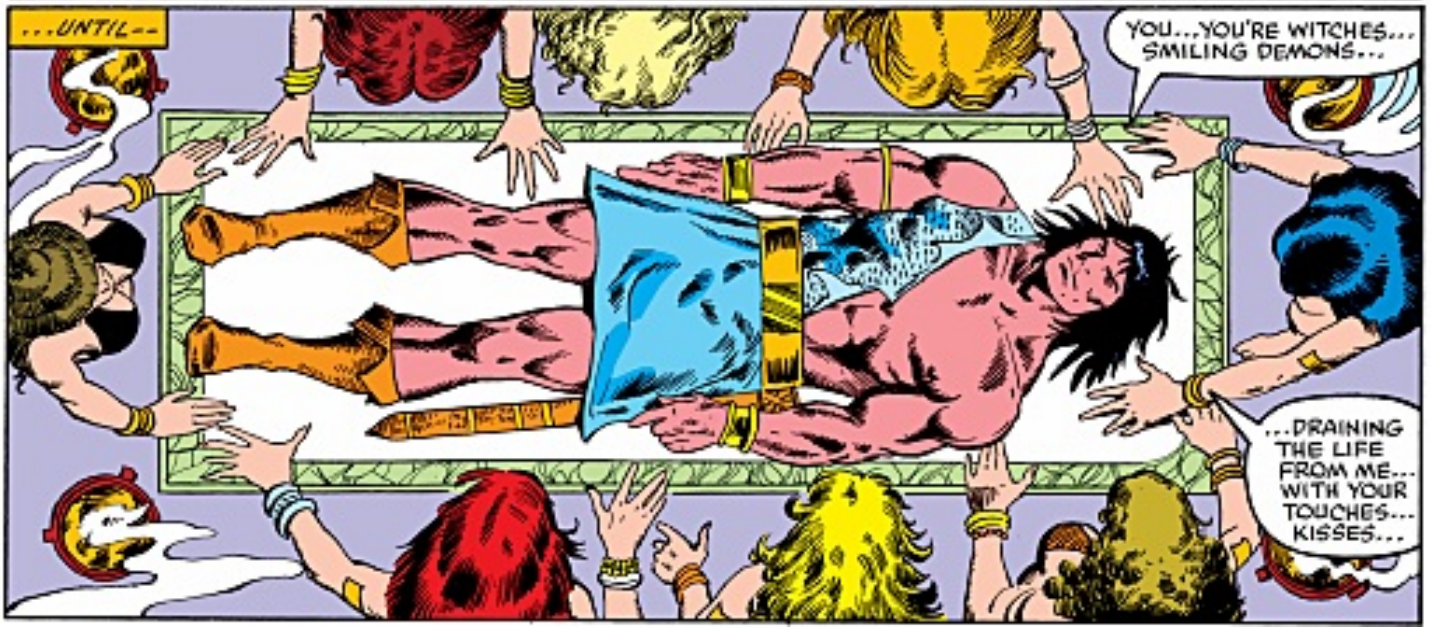
YOU...YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL... ALL OF YOU... EVERY ONE OF YOU...
MAKING ME ACHE...UNTIL I...I *WANT* YOU... BUT...ZENOBIA...MY QUEEN...MY WIFE...
N-NO...YOU...YOU'RE CONFUSING ME...STOP IT...LEAVE ME ALONE...TAKE YOUR BEAUTY AWAY...

STAY BACK...DON'T WANT TO STRIKE AT YOU... NOT AT WOMEN...NOT AT...SUCH BEAUTY...BUT I...

...I FEEL SO ...GOOD...
AND IF CONAN REMEMBERS SCYLLANA'S WARNING ABOUT THE GENTLE TOUCH OF SLENDER FINGERS...


...THE MEMORY SOON FADES...
...ALONG WITH HIS STRENGTH...
...HIS WILL...

...AND HIS THOUGHTS...


...UNTIL--
YOU...YOU'RE WITCHES... SMILING DEMONS...
...DRAINING THE LIFE FROM ME... WITH YOUR TOUCHES... KISSES...

MUSK INCENSE... A GENTLE BREEZE... THE FAR-OFF TINKLING OF BELLS... WIND-CHIMES... A GONG... AND THE SUCCUBI FLOAT BACK, MAKING WAY FOR SCYLLANA HERSELF...
YOU HAVE JUST PARTAKEN OF YOUR LAST PLEASURES IN THIS LIFE, CONAN.
EACH KISS FROM MY WOMEN HAS GIVEN YOU A CLOSER GLIMPSE OF HELL... AND NOW I HAVE COME--

--TO DRIVE HOME THE POINT AND OPEN YOUR EYES FOR-EVER.
WAIT... YOUR HELLIONS WERE NOT ENOUGH FOR ME... ONE LAST KISS, WITCH-WOMAN... FROM YOU...

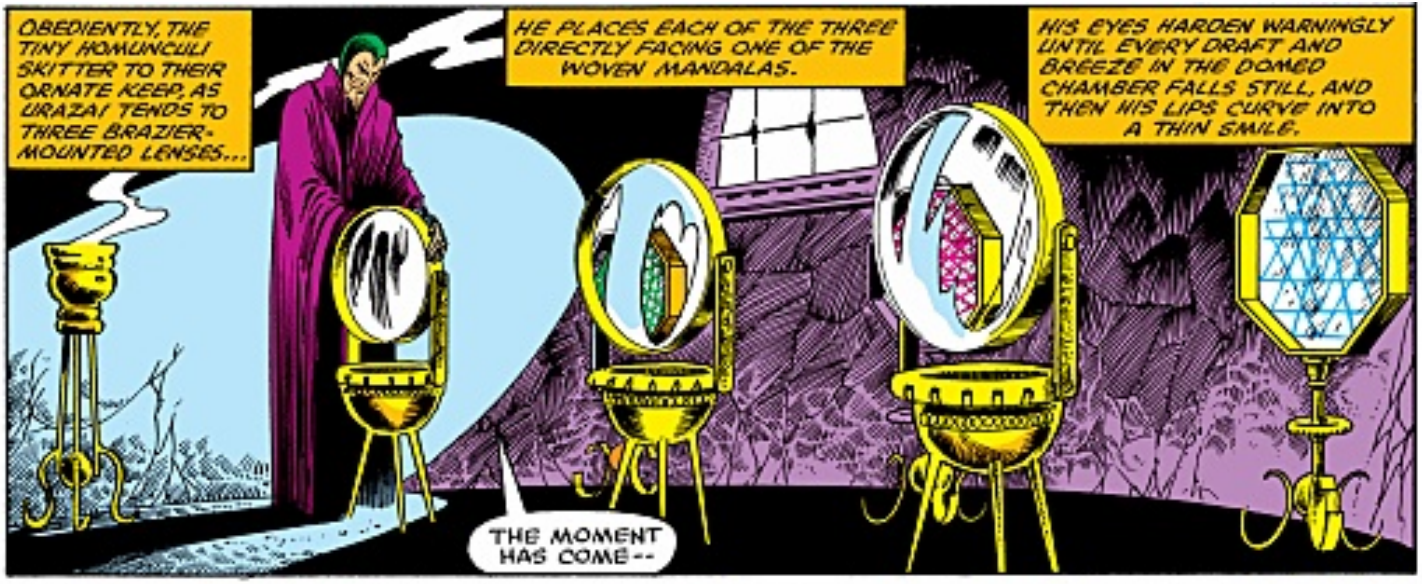
AYE--'TWILL BE SHEER PLEASURE TO PLANT THE FINAL KISS OF HELL UPON YOUR CRACKED LIPS.
AND CONAN BITES HER LIP.

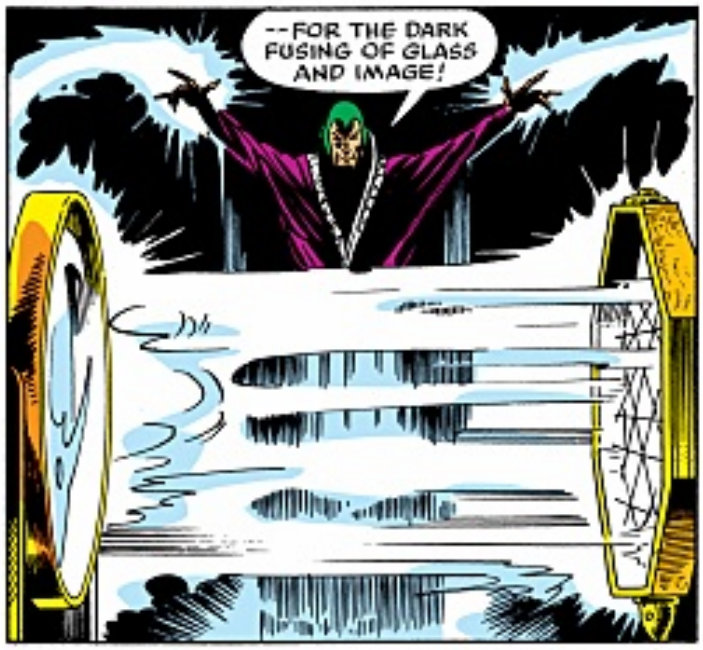
RAISING HIS ARM IS PURE AGONY-- YET HE REFUSES TO RELEASE HIS CLENCHED TEETH.
AND IT IS ONLY WHEN SCYLLANA, THRASHING, ATTAINS A STRIKING POSITION--

--THAT HIS HAND FINDS ITS WILL--AND HER HAIR--

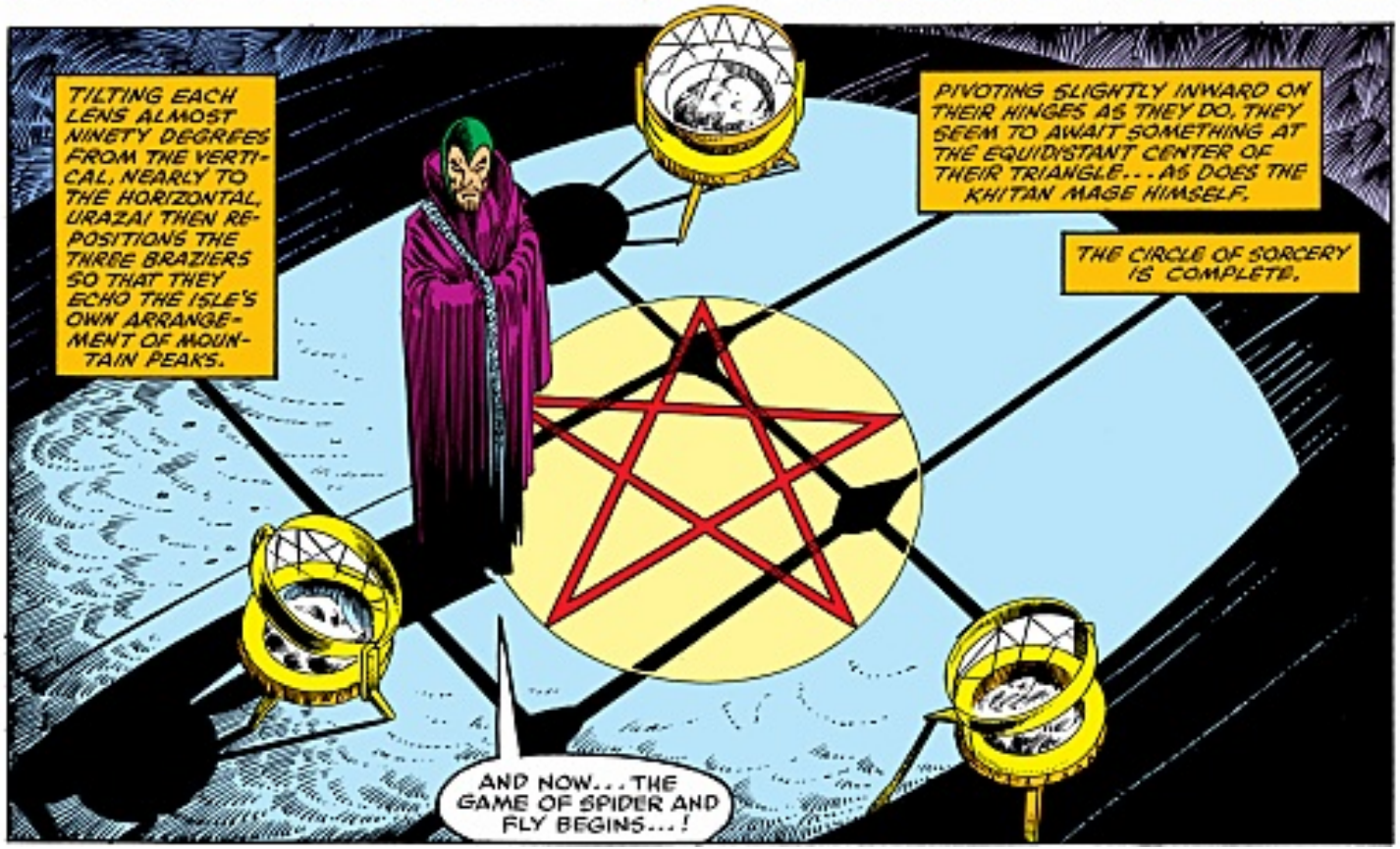
--AND HIS FOOT LASHES OUT AT A BRAZIER OF BURNING MUSK.

FIRE AND SILVER...!
FIRE!
THE SUCCUBI BURST INTO FLAMES.
A KISS BEFORE HELL, INDEED! AND NOW, WITCH-WOMAN...
...ENJOY YOUR HELL!
GREATLY WEAKENED, CONAN NEVERTHELESS SLIDES FROM THE SACRIFICIAL DAIS AND STAGGERS FROM THE SWIFTLY BUILDING CONFLAGRATION...
I AM GETTING OLD... HAVE TO REST... AGAIN.
THE VITALITY OF THE MAN SURPASSES BELIEF.
A FORMIDABLE OPPONENT INDEED... EVEN THOUGH I HAVE ALREADY WON THE CONTEST BY DEFAULT...
AND CONSIDERING THE PRESENT CONDITION OF SCYLLANA'S TOWER DOMAIN, IT IS FORTUNATE THAT I THOUGHT TO CLAIM THE PRIZE EARLY...
...THIEVING IT FROM UNDER HER VERY NOSE...
...EVEN AS SHE CONJURED HER MIST-WOMEN.
AH! YOU'VE COMPLETED YOUR WORK, MY LITTLE FRIENDS-- EXCELLENT!
YOU MAY NOW RETURN TO YOUR CASK...
BUT YOU'VE DONE A SUPERB JOB--AND IF ALL GOES WELL, YOU WILL SOON HAVE A VERY FRESH MEAL...

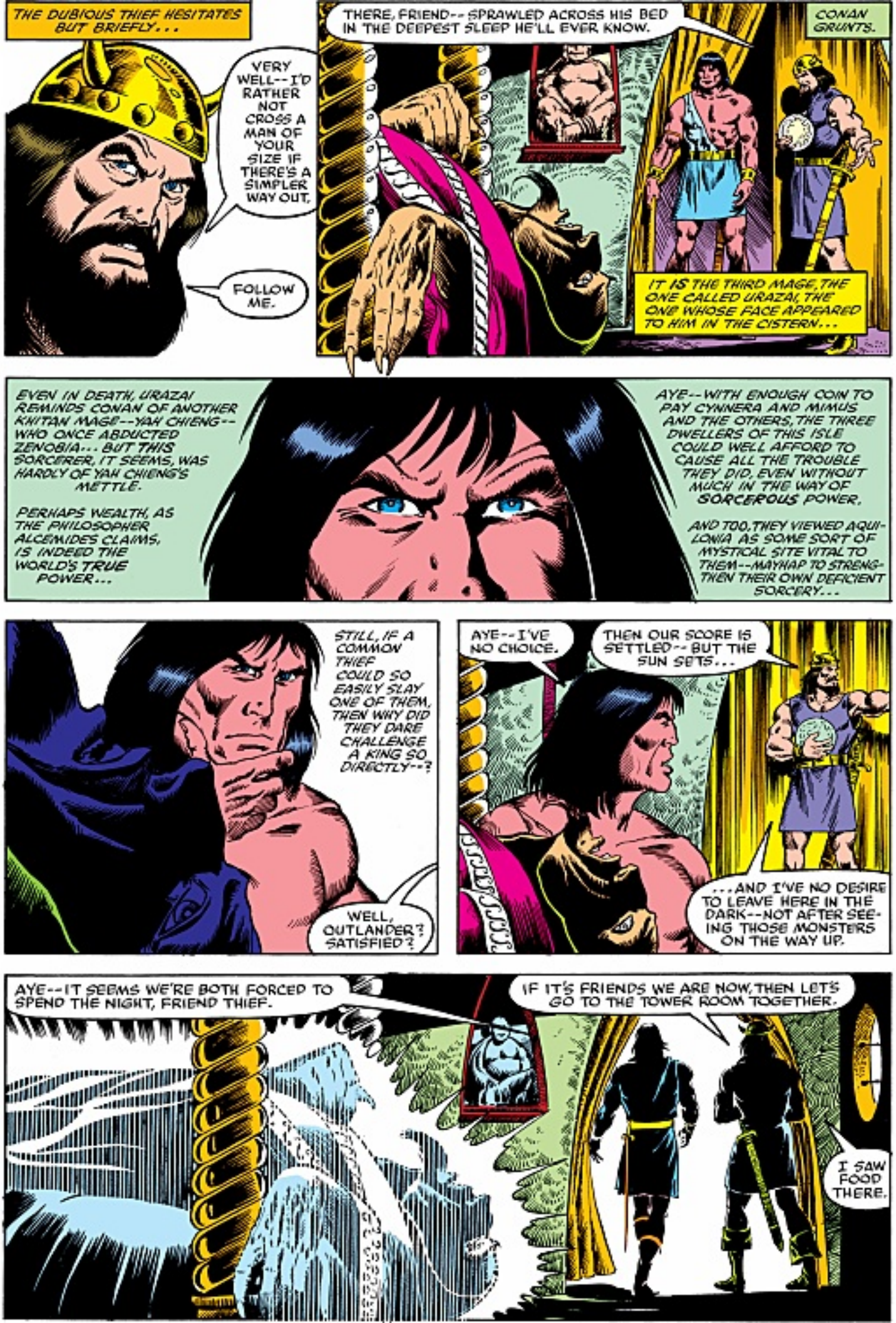

OBEDIENTLY, THE TINY HOMUNCULI SKITTER TO THEIR ORNATE KEEP, AS URAZAI TENDS TO THREE BRAZIER-MOUNTED LENSES...
HE PLACES EACH OF THE THREE DIRECTLY FACING ONE OF THE WOVEN MANDALAS.
HIS EYES HARDEN WARNINGLY UNTIL EVERY DRAFT AND BREEZE IN THE DOMED CHAMBER FALLS STILL, AND THEN HIS LIPS CURVE INTO A THIN SMILE.
THE MOMENT HAS COME--

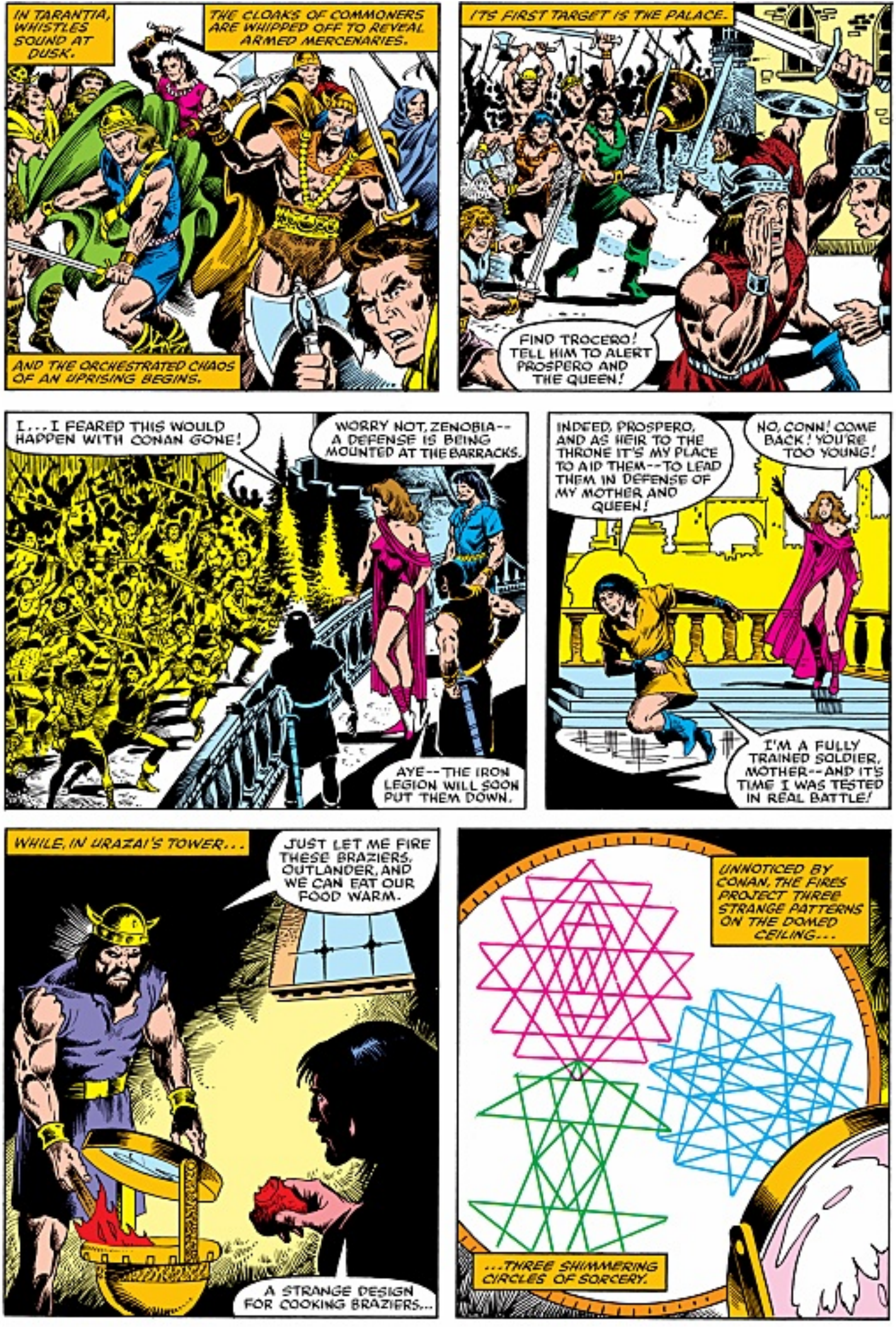

--FOR THE DARK FUSING OF GLASS AND IMAGE!

YES--EACH LENS IS NOW INDELIBLY ETCHED WITH ONE OF THE THREE PATTERNS...
ALL GOES WELL.


TILTING EACH LENS ALMOST NINETY DEGREES FROM THE VERTICAL, NEARLY TO THE HORIZONTAL, URAZAI THEN REPOSITIONS THE THREE BRAZIERS SO THAT THEY ECHO THE ISLE'S OWN ARRANGEMENT OF MOUNTAIN PEAKS.
PIVOTING SLIGHTLY INWARD ON THEIR HINGES AS THEY DO, THEY SEEM TO AWAIT SOMETHING AT THE EQUIDISTANT CENTER OF THEIR TRIANGLE...AS DOES THE KHITAN MAGE HIMSELF.
THE CIRCLE OF SORCERY IS COMPLETE.
AND NOW...THE GAME OF SPIDER AND FLY BEGINS...!

DAWN FINDS TARANTIA ABUZZ WITH CONSPIRACY...
PASS THE WORD TO THE OTHER REBELS--WE STRIKE AT DUSK.
...EVEN AS THE KING SETS OUT FOR THE ISLE'S THIRD AND FINAL PEAK.
NO MATERIAL FOR WINGS THIS TIME-- THE FLAMES HAVE SEEN TO THAT.
I'LL JUST HAVE TO FACE WHATEVER DANGERS THE GROUND MAY HOLD.
AND MONSTERS THERE BE APLENTY, YET EACH SEEMS MORIBUND...
...AND CURIOUSLY DISINTERESTED IN HIS PASSING.
INDEED, IT IS ALMOST AS IF THE THIRD WIZARD WERE NOT EVEN TRYING. IS HE ASLEEP, CONAN WONDERS, OR ARROGANTLY OVER-CONFIDENT?
OR IS THE SORCERER, IN TRUTH, GONE?
HAS HE, UPON LEARNING THE FATE OF HIS TWO FELLOW WIZARDS, FLED--?
WHATEVER THE REASONS, CONAN SCALES THE FINAL PEAK WITHOUT CHALLENGE.
STILL WARY OF TRAPS, HOWEVER, HE ENTERS THE KHITAN STRUCTURE SLOWLY...
...AND FINDS--
EH--?! STAND BACK AND LET ME DEPART! I'VE WON MY PRIZE FAIRLY--HAD TO SLAY A CURSED ORIENTAL WIZARD TO GET IT--
--AND BY BEL'S NIMBLE FINGERS, I'LL LET NO ONE TAKE IT FROM ME--ESPECIALLY NOT AN OAFISH BARBARIAN!
WATCH YOUR TONGUE, DOG!
YOU SAY THE WIZARD OF THIS DWELLING IS DEAD--?
SHOW ME-- AND I'LL LET YOU DEPART WITH YOUR LOOT.


THE DUBIOUS THIEF HESITATES BUT BRIEFLY...
VERY WELL--I'D RATHER NOT CROSS A MAN OF YOUR SIZE IF THERE'S A SIMPLER WAY OUT.
FOLLOW ME.
THERE, FRIEND--SPRAWLED ACROSS HIS BED IN THE DEEPEST SLEEP HE'LL EVER KNOW.
CONAN GRUNTS.
IT IS THE THIRD MAGE, THE ONE CALLED URAZAI, THE ONE WHOSE FACE APPEARED TO HIM IN THE CISTERN...
EVEN IN DEATH, URAZAI REMINDS CONAN OF ANOTHER KHITAN MAGE--YAH CHIENG--WHO ONCE ABDUCTED ZENOBIA... BUT THIS SORCERER, IT SEEMS, WAS HARDLY OF YAH CHIENG'S METTLE.
PERHAPS WEALTH, AS THE PHILOSOPHER ALCEMIDES CLAIMS, IS INDEED THE WORLD'S TRUE POWER...
AYE--WITH ENOUGH COIN TO PAY CYNNERA AND MIMUS AND THE OTHERS, THE THREE DWELLERS OF THIS ISLE COULD WELL AFFORD TO CAUSE ALL THE TROUBLE THEY DID, EVEN WITHOUT MUCH IN THE WAY OF SORCEROUS POWER.
AND TOO, THEY VIEWED AQUILONIA AS SOME SORT OF MYSTICAL SITE VITAL TO THEM--MAYHAP TO STRENGTHEN THEIR OWN DEFICIENT SORCERY...
STILL, IF A COMMON THIEF COULD SO EASILY SLAY ONE OF THEM, THEN WHY DID THEY DARE CHALLENGE A KING SO DIRECTLY--?
WELL, OUTLANDER? SATISFIED?
AYE--I'VE NO CHOICE.
THEN OUR SCORE IS SETTLED--BUT THE SUN SETS...
...AND I'VE NO DESIRE TO LEAVE HERE IN THE DARK--NOT AFTER SEEING THOSE MONSTERS ON THE WAY UP.
AYE--IT SEEMS WE'RE BOTH FORCED TO SPEND THE NIGHT, FRIEND THIEF.
IF IT'S FRIENDS WE ARE NOW, THEN LET'S GO TO THE TOWER ROOM TOGETHER.
I SAW FOOD THERE.


IN TARANTIA, WHISTLES SOUND AT DUSK.
THE CLOAKS OF COMMONERS ARE WHIPPED OFF TO REVEAL ARMED MERCENARIES.
AND THE ORCHESTRATED CHAOS OF AN UPRISING BEGINS.
ITS FIRST TARGET IS THE PALACE.
FIND TROCERO! TELL HIM TO ALERT PROSPERO AND THE QUEEN!
I... I FEARED THIS WOULD HAPPEN WITH CONAN GONE!
WORRY NOT, ZENOBIA-- A DEFENSE IS BEING MOUNTED AT THE BARRACKS.
AYE-- THE IRON LEGION WILL SOON PUT THEM DOWN.
INDEED, PROSPERO, AND AS HEIR TO THE THRONE IT'S MY PLACE TO AID THEM-- TO LEAD THEM IN DEFENSE OF MY MOTHER AND QUEEN!
NO, CONN! COME BACK! YOU'RE TOO YOUNG!
I'M A FULLY TRAINED SOLDIER, MOTHER-- AND IT'S TIME I WAS TESTED IN REAL BATTLE!
WHILE, IN URAZAI'S TOWER...
JUST LET ME FIRE THESE BRAZIERS, OUTLANDER, AND WE CAN EAT OUR FOOD WARM.
A STRANGE DESIGN FOR COOKING BRAZIERS...
UNNOTICED BY CONAN, THE FIRES PROJECT THREE STRANGE PATTERNS ON THE DOMED CEILING...
...THREE SHIMMERING CIRCLES OF SORCERY.

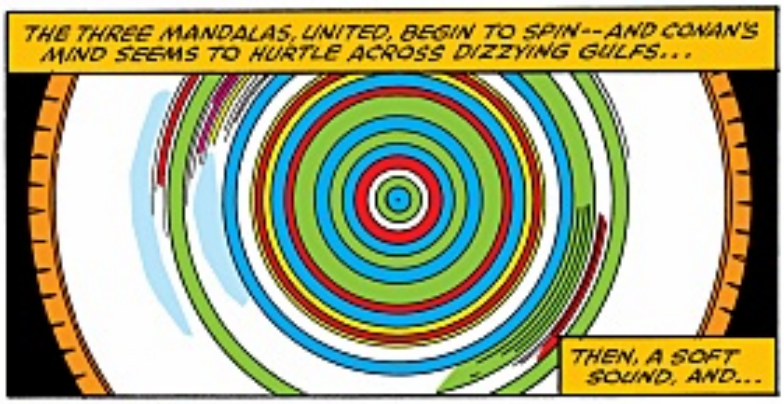
NOW... A BETTER ANGLE TO CATCH THE WARMTH FOR OUR MEAT...

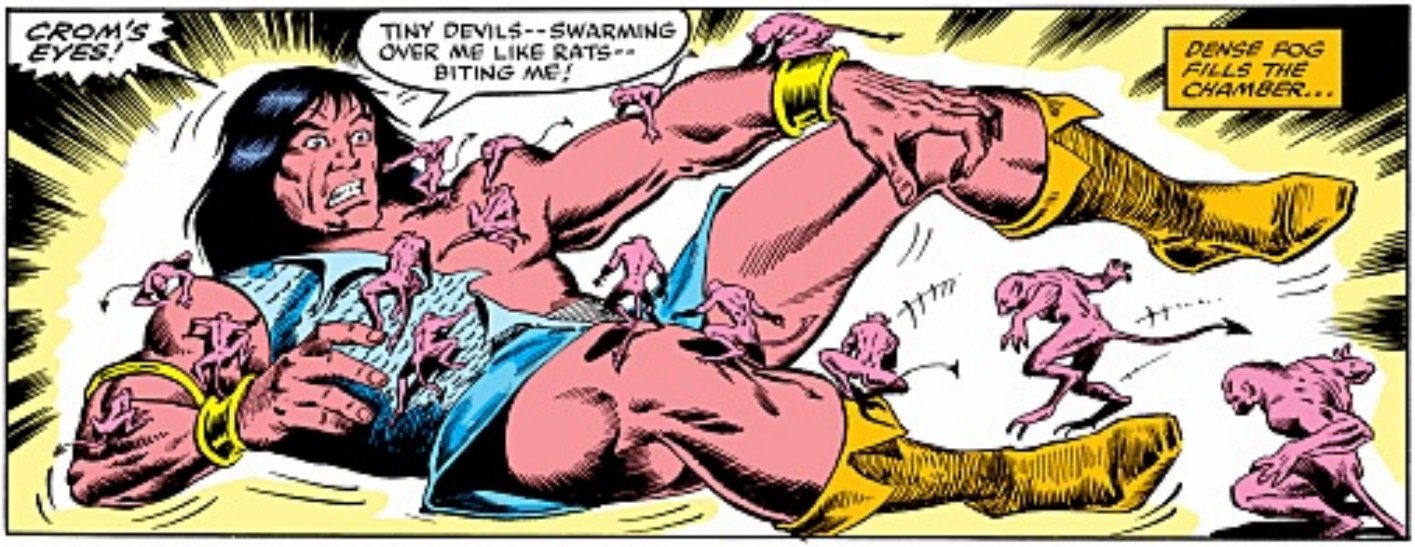
TWO OF THE PATTERNS MERGE, SUPERIMPOSED IN GREATER INTRICACY.

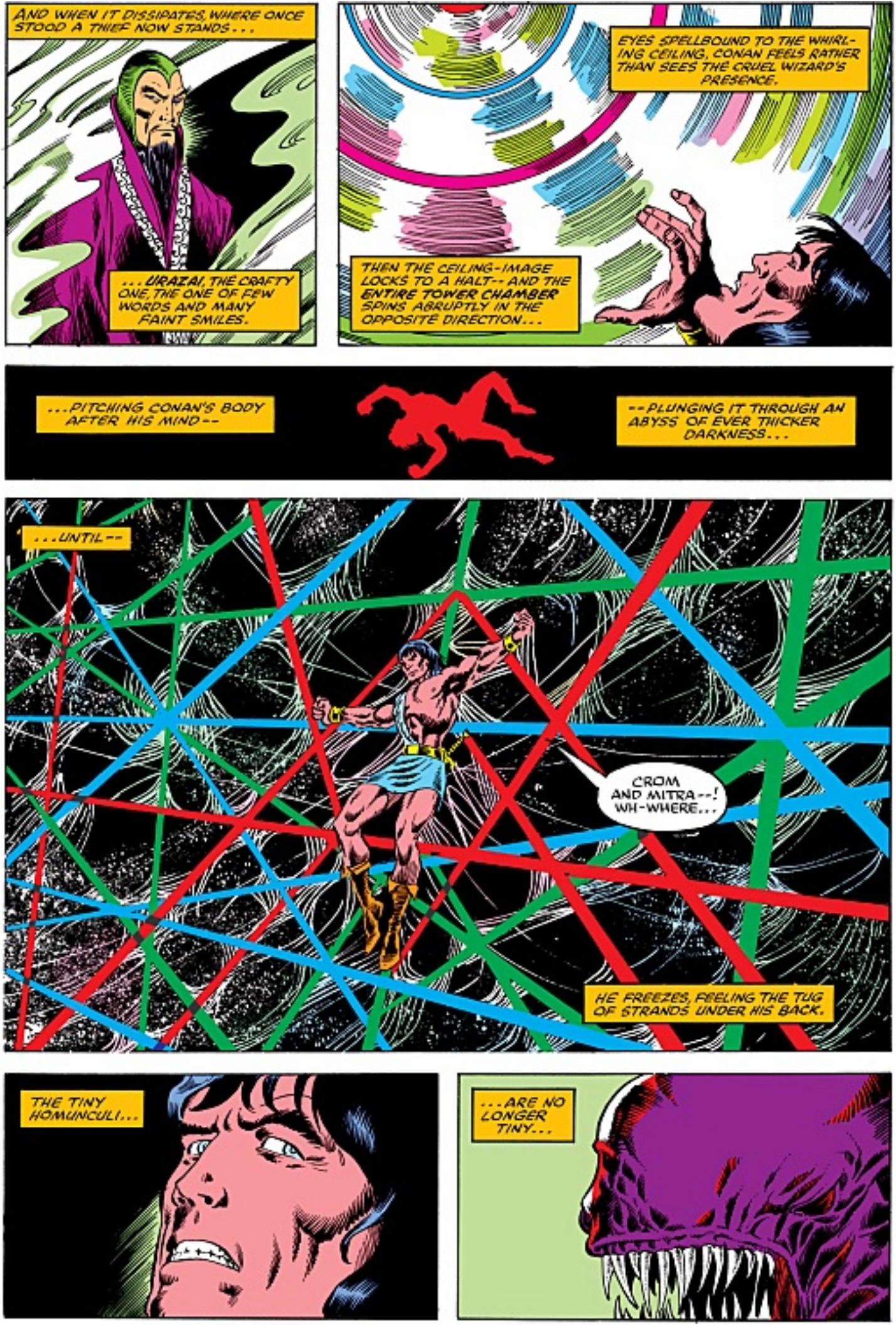
AND NOW THE THIRD...
WAIT--THOSE THINGS MAY BE INSTRUMENTS OF SORCERY! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING--!

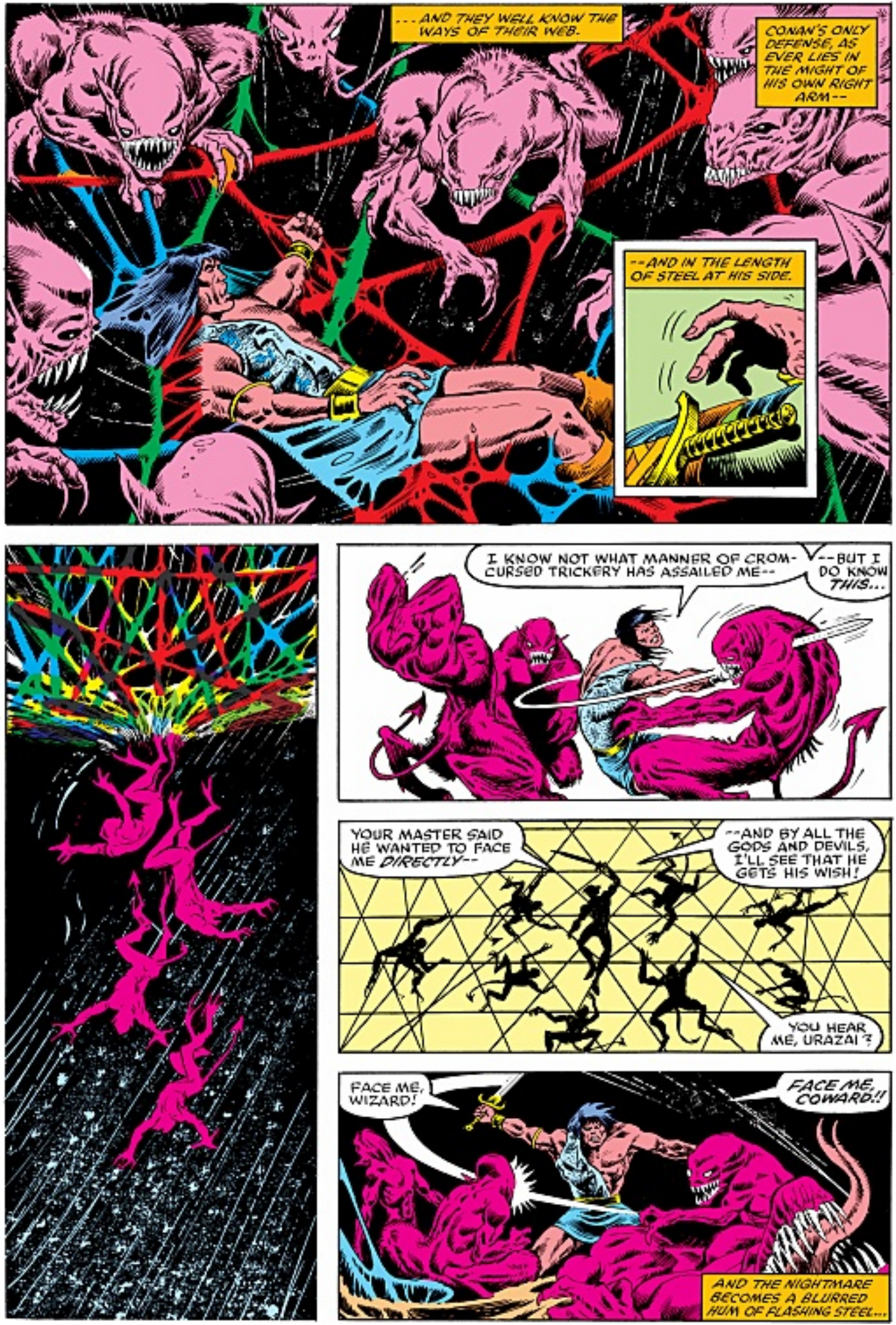
OH, BUT I DO, CONAN--AS YOU CAN SEE BY LOOKING AT THE CEILING.
YOU KNOW MY NAME, THIEF?! BUT HOW--

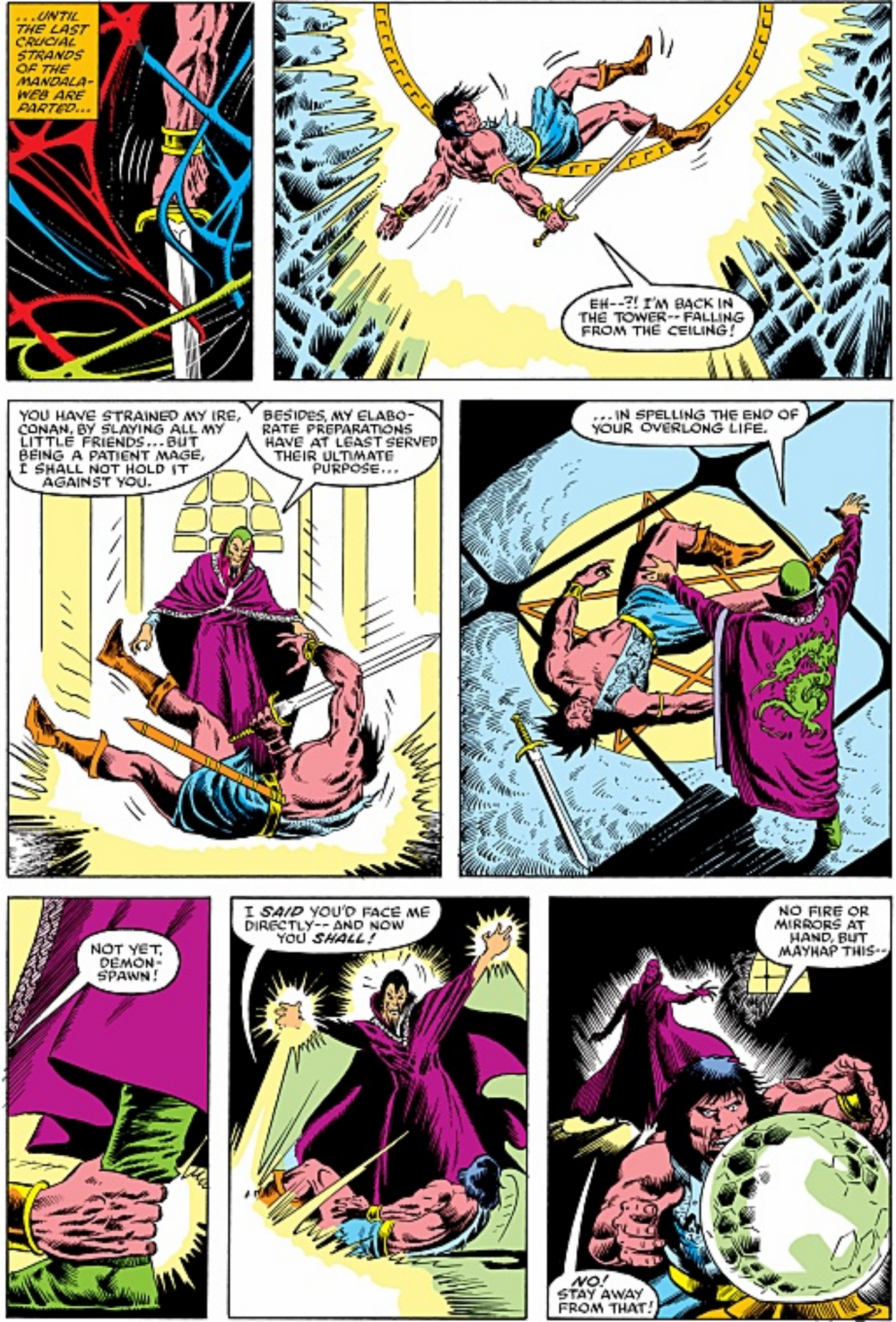
I AM NOT A THIEF.
MITRA AND ISHTAR! THE CEILING--!


THE THREE MANDALAS, UNITED, BEGIN TO SPIN--AND CONAN'S MIND SEEMS TO HURTLE ACROSS DIZZYING GULFS...
THEN, A SOFT SOUND, AND...


CROM'S EYES!
TINY DEVILS--SWARMING OVER ME LIKE RATS--BITING ME!
DENSE FOG FILLS THE CHAMBER...


AND WHEN IT DISSIPATES, WHERE ONCE STOOD A THIEF NOW STANDS . . .
. . . URAZAI, THE CRAFTY ONE, THE ONE OF FEW WORDS AND MANY FAINT SMILES.
EYES SPELLBOUND TO THE WHIRLING CEILING, CONAN FEELS RATHER THAN SEES THE CRUEL WIZARD'S PRESENCE.
THEN THE CEILING-IMAGE LOCKS TO A HALT-- AND THE ENTIRE TOWER CHAMBER SPINS ABRUPTLY IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION . . .
. . . PITCHING CONAN'S BODY AFTER HIS MIND--
--PLUNGING IT THROUGH AN ABYSS OF EVER THICKER DARKNESS . . .
. . . UNTIL--
CROM AND MITRA--! WH-WHERE . . .
HE FREEZES, FEELING THE TUG OF STRANDS UNDER HIS BACK.
THE TINY HOMUNCULI . . .
. . . ARE NO LONGER TINY . . .


...AND THEY WELL KNOW THE WAYS OF THEIR WEB.
CONAN'S ONLY DEFENSE, AS EVER LIES IN THE MIGHT OF HIS OWN RIGHT ARM--
--AND IN THE LENGTH OF STEEL AT HIS SIDE.
I KNOW NOT WHAT MANNER OF CROM-CURSED TRICKERY HAS ASSAILED ME--
--BUT I DO KNOW THIS...
YOUR MASTER SAID HE WANTED TO FACE ME DIRECTLY--
--AND BY ALL THE GODS AND DEVILS, I'LL SEE THAT HE GETS HIS WISH!
YOU HEAR ME, URAZAI?
FACE ME, WIZARD!
FACE ME, COWARD!!
AND THE NIGHTMARE BECOMES A BLURRED HUM OF FLASHING STEEL...

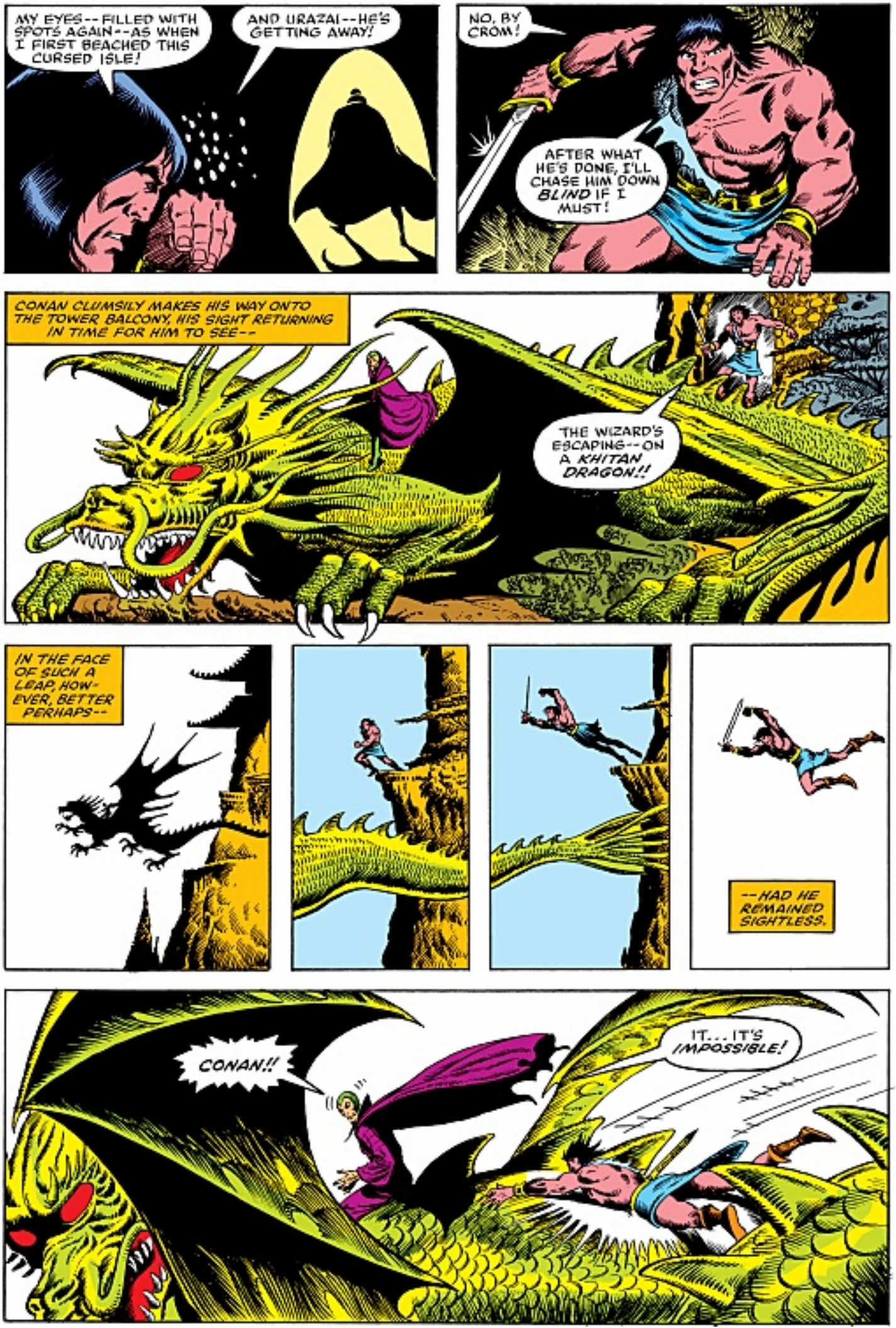

...UNTIL THE LAST CRUCIAL STRANDS OF THE MANDALA-WEB ARE PARTED...
EH--?! I'M BACK IN THE TOWER--FALLING FROM THE CEILING!
YOU HAVE STRAINED MY IRE, CONAN, BY SLAYING ALL MY LITTLE FRIENDS... BUT BEING A PATIENT MAGE, I SHALL NOT HOLD IT AGAINST YOU.
BESIDES, MY ELABORATE PREPARATIONS HAVE AT LEAST SERVED THEIR ULTIMATE PURPOSE...
...IN SPELLING THE END OF YOUR OVERLONG LIFE.
NOT YET, DEMON-SPAWN!
I SAID YOU'D FACE ME DIRECTLY--AND NOW YOU SHALL!
NO FIRE OR MIRRORS AT HAND, BUT MAYHAP THIS--
NO! STAY AWAY FROM THAT!

THEN I WAS RIGHT--THE GEM DOES REPEL YOUR MAGICKS!
THAT IS THE SIGHT CRYSTAL!
PUT IT DOWN! DO YOU HEAR ME?!
AYE, URAZAI, I HEAR YOU WELL...
...FAR TOO WELL TO HEED YOU!

AND FINALLY, WHEN THE MAGE'S STORE OF POWER HAS BEEN EXHAUSTED...
YOU MAY HAVE WON, BARBARIAN-KING--
--BUT YOUR VICTORY COMES TOO LATE! EVEN IN DEFEAT, I AM THE TRUE VICTOR! LOOK INTO THE SIGHT CRYSTAL!
AND IN ONE HEART-NUMBING MOMENT OF SHOCK, CONAN SPIES THE TRUTH...
TREACHERY! REBELS RISING UP--SPILLING ONTO THE GROUNDS OF THE VERY PALACE--
--HARRYING MY IRON LEGIONS--INCLUDING CONN!

GET INSIDE, ZENOBIA!
NO, TROCERO! IF MY YOUNG SON CAN DEFEND THE THRONE WITH HIS OWN HAND, THEN WHO AM I TO SHRINK FROM THE BATTLE?!
IF ONLY CONAN WERE HERE--TO RALLY THE MEN AGAINST THIS DOOMED OUTCOME!

NO, ZENOBIA! LISTEN TO TROCERO!
GET INSIDE! INTO THE PALACE BEFORE--
FOOL!
ONCE AGAIN YOU HAVE FALLEN PREY TO MY STRATAGEMS!


MY EYES--FILLED WITH SPOTS AGAIN--AS WHEN I FIRST BEACHED THIS CURSED ISLE!
AND URAZAI--HE'S GETTING AWAY!
NO, BY CROM!
AFTER WHAT HE'S DONE, I'LL CHASE HIM DOWN BLIND IF I MUST!
CONAN CLUMSILY MAKES HIS WAY ONTO THE TOWER BALCONY, HIS SIGHT RETURNING IN TIME FOR HIM TO SEE--
THE WIZARD'S ESCAPING--ON A KHITAN DRAGON!!
IN THE FACE OF SUCH A LEAP, HOWEVER, BETTER PERHAPS--
--HAD HE REMAINED SIGHTLESS.
CONAN!!
IT... IT'S IMPOSSIBLE!

MAYBE SO, WIZARD. BUT IF YOU DON'T GUIDE THIS BEAST STRAIGHT TO TARANTIA -- THE IMPOSSIBLE WILL SLIT YOUR STINKING THROAT!
OBEY AND I'LL SPARE YOUR LIFE -- NOW THAT YOUR POWERS HAVE WANED.

FOR THE FIRST TIME, URAZAI RESPONDS WITHOUT A SMILE -- AND THE DRAGON WHEELS OFF TO THE NORTH, ACROSS THE BENIGHTED ISLE...
FASTER, URAZAI!
...TOWARD THE MAINLAND...

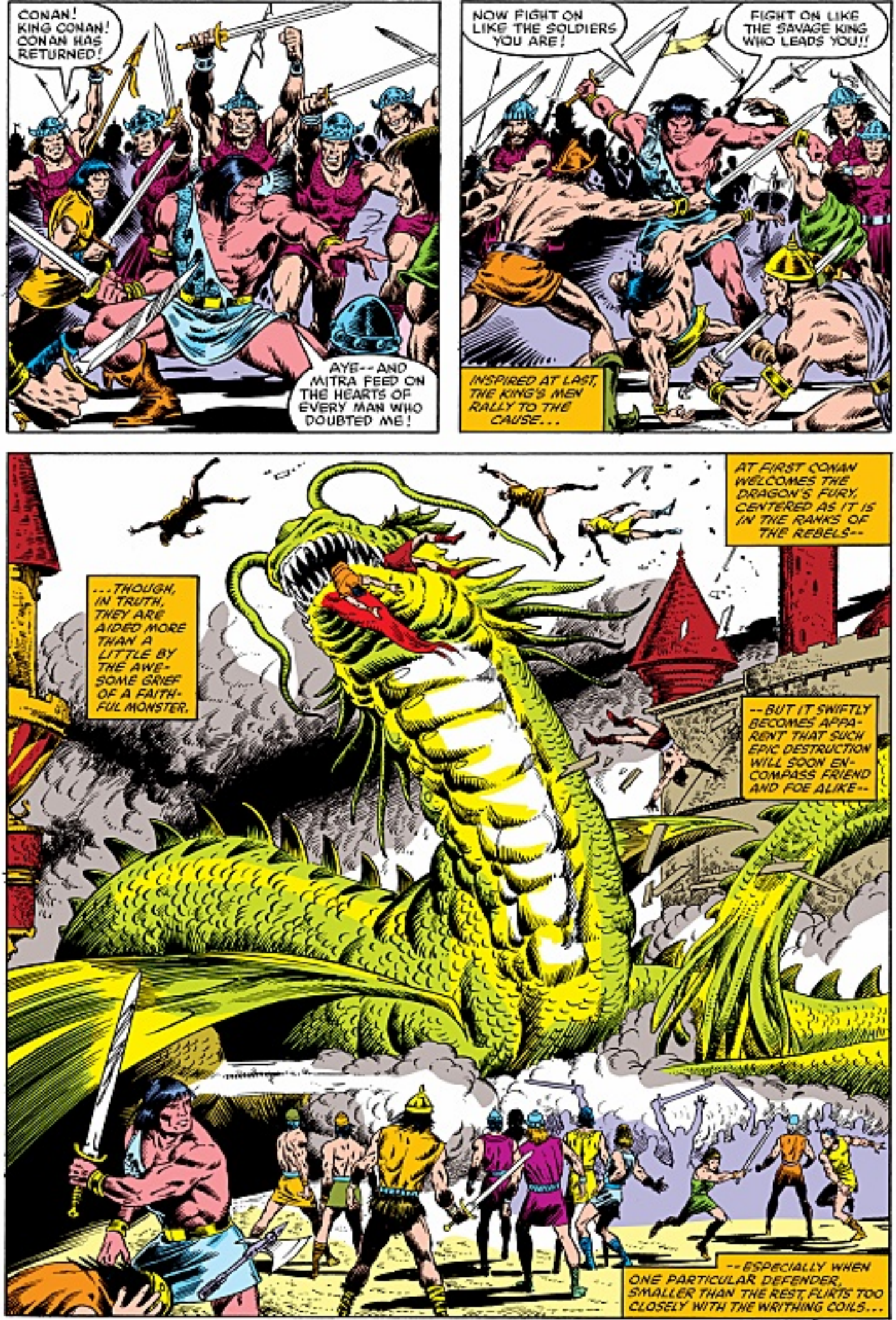
...AND TARANTIA BEYOND.
HEAR ME, WARRIORS OF TARANTIA! I AM THE SON OF CONAN AND YOU FIGHT AT MY SIDE!
FIGHT ON, WARRIORS!

FIGHT ON!!
DOGGEDLY, THE TROOPS DO INDEED RALLY...
...BUT CONN IS STILL TOO YOUNG TO WORK THAT SPECIAL MAGIC WHICH TRANSCENDS HOPELESSNESS. HIS INEXPERIENCED LEADERSHIP FAILS TO OVERCOME THE HORROR OF THE SLAUGHTER.

THEN--
IRON LEGIONS!
CONAN OF AQUILONIA HAS RETURNED!

NOW WE WILL-- WHAT?!
YOU POINT AT CONN, URAZAI?
YOU DARE AIM YOUR VILE MAGICKS AT MY SON?!

BY CROM, YOU DESERVE TO DIE-- LIKE A MADDENED CUR!
BUT... BUT YOU PROMISED MY LIFE--!
I LIED.
SWACT
I GIVE YOU YOUR LEADER, TRAITOROUS SCUM!
AND NOW, BY CROM, I'LL GIVE EVERY FILTHY REBEL AMONG YOU THE SAME HE GOT!
ITS MASTER DEAD, THE GROTESQUE DRAGON HAS ALREADY BEGUN ITS PLUNGE IN AN AGONY OF RAGE...
AS BEST HE CAN, CONAN GUIDES IT STRAIGHT INTO THE REBEL ONSLAUGHT--
--LEAPING CLEAR AT THE LAST POSSIBLE MOMENT, HIS EYES ALREADY SEEKING CONN AND THE PALACE DEFENDERS.


CONAN! KING CONAN! CONAN HAS RETURNED!
AYE--AND MITRA FEED ON THE HEARTS OF EVERY MAN WHO DOUBTED ME!
NOW FIGHT ON LIKE THE SOLDIERS YOU ARE!
FIGHT ON LIKE THE SAVAGE KING WHO LEADS YOU!!
INSPIRED AT LAST, THE KING'S MEN RALLY TO THE CAUSE...
AT FIRST CONAN WELCOMES THE DRAGON'S FURY, CENTERED AS IT IS IN THE RANKS OF THE REBELS--
...THOUGH, IN TRUTH, THEY ARE AIDED MORE THAN A LITTLE BY THE AWESOME GRIEF OF A FAITHFUL MONSTER.
--BUT IT SWIFTLY BECOMES APPARENT THAT SUCH EPIC DESTRUCTION WILL SOON ENCOMPASS FRIEND AND FOE ALIKE--
--ESPECIALLY WHEN ONE PARTICULAR DEFENDER, SMALLER THAN THE REST, FLIRTS TOO CLOSELY WITH THE WRITHING COILS...

CONN!
GET BACK, SON!!

IT IS THEN THAT CONAN DECIDES TO PUT THE BEAST OUT OF ITS MISERY--

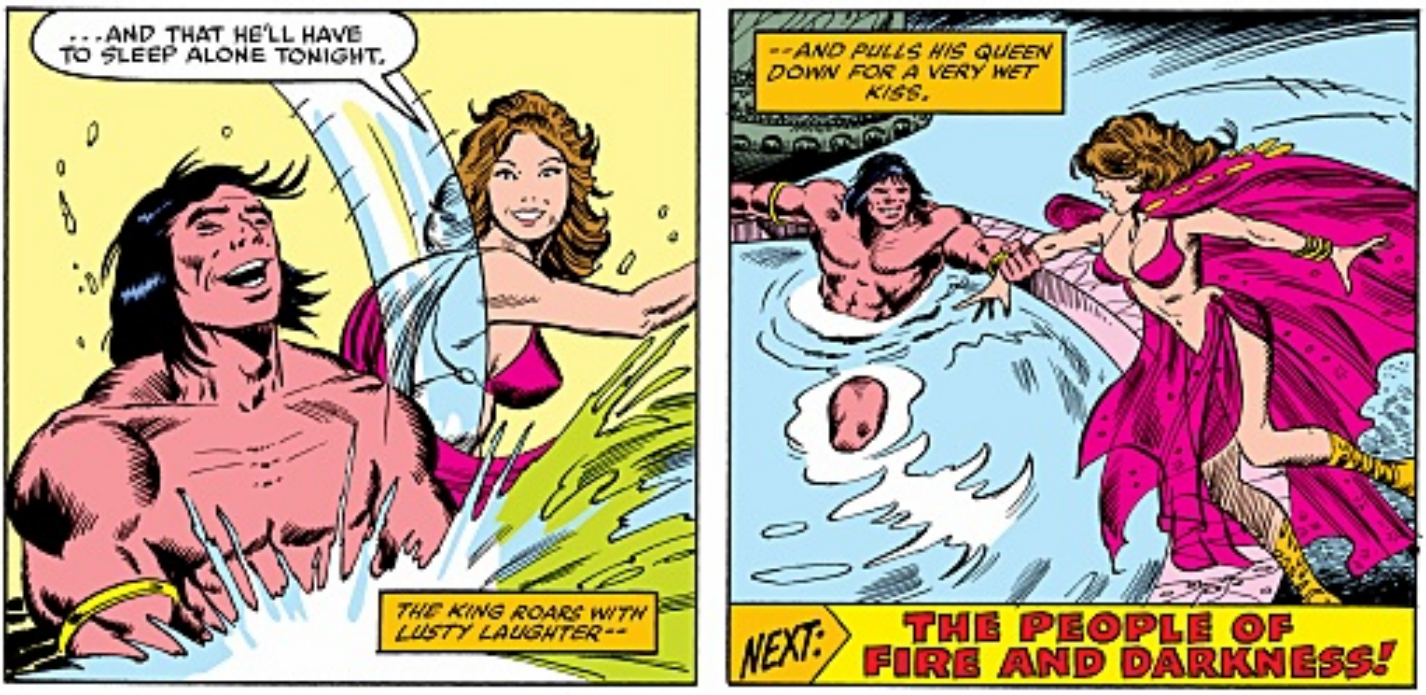
--BEFORE REJOINING THE TURNING TIDE OF BATTLE.
WHY DID YOU PUSH ME ASIDE, FATHER? I COULD HAVE TAKEN THE BEAST!
NO DOUBT, SON-- BUT FOR THE TIME BEING WHY NOT LIMIT YOURSELF TO A DOZEN OR SO HUMAN FOES?
THEY'LL SUFFICE FOR YOUR FIRST TEST OF FIRE...
IF A DOZEN REMAIN-- BUT MOST OF THEM HAVE ALREADY SEEN THE FUTURE OF THEIR FOLLY...

THEY'RE TURNING TAILS --RUNNING LIKE DOGS!
AYE-- AND A PRETTY SIGHT, IS IT NOT?

MAGNIFICENT FIGHTING, MY KING! AFTER SUCH A ROUT, IT'LL BE A LONG TIME BEFORE THE REBELS AGAIN DARE SUCH A MOVE!
AYE, TROCERO...
...ESPECIALLY SINCE I'VE NOW RID THE WORLD OF THE THREE POWERS BEHIND THEM.

I'M PROUD OF YOU, CONN-- FEW GROWN MEN HAVE EVER FOUGHT SO WELL.
BUT CONN IS STRANGELY SUBDUED...
...HIS EYES SOMEWHAT...HAUNTED.
THANK YOU, FATHER, BUT I...I THINK I'D LIKE TO BE ALONE FOR A WHILE.
NHN--I DON'T LIKE HIS REACTION.
BUT I DO, MY HUSBAND...
THE BUSINESS OF KILLING--EVEN WHEN NECESSARY--IS NEVER SOMETHING TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT.
AND REMEMBER, MY HUSBAND, HE'S OUR SON.
AYE, WITH MUCH OF HIS MOTHER IN HIM --AND MAYHAP IT'S FOR THE BEST.

LATER, IN THE ROYAL BATH...
NOT MANY WOUNDS THIS TIME--BUT YOUR FOOLHARDINESS WILL YET BE THE DEATH OF YOU...
YOU KNOW YOU LOVE IT, WOMAN, AND IT WAS WORTH IT THIS TIME.
MAYBE WE'LL NOW HAVE SOME PEACE AROUND HERE...
EH--? WHAT'S THIS IN THE BATH CRYSTALS?
MY MESSAGE--? BUT I THOUGHT YOU BATHED EVERY DAY...
OH, BUT I DO...
THIS ISN'T YOUR MESSAGE.
IT'S FROM SOMEONE NAMED ZENOBIA, TELLING SOMEONE NAMED CONAN THAT SHE'S GONE FISHING...


...AND THAT HE'LL HAVE TO SLEEP ALONE TONIGHT.
THE KING ROARS WITH LUSTY LAUGHTER--
--AND PULLS HIS QUEEN DOWN FOR A VERY WET KISS.
NEXT: THE PEOPLE OF FIRE AND DARKNESS!

KING CONAN

c/o MARVEL COMICS GROUP
575 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022

LOUISE JONES
EDITOR
DANNY FINGEROTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Louise and the Gang,

Congratulations — KING CONAN #11 was a terrific comic! I enjoyed the appearance of old Alcemides (too brief), and I hope to see more of him in the future. Also, how about having some of Conan's friends (like Murillo or Erfu) appear in the pages of KING CONAN soon?

I have one question: How is Conan's sword proportionately the same in size both to Death Shaper and to Conan's seemingly smaller frame?

Nice comic. Keep up the good work!

Ryan McGaughy
15 Upper Falls Ck. Rd.
Elma, WA 98541

Conan's sword was certainly smaller in proportion to his foe than it was to the King himself, Ryan. It's just that a funny little thing that we up here call perpective makes the sword appear to be larger or smaller depending on the angle of view in any given panel. Speaking of perspective, here comes another missive over the horizon...

Dear Louise,

Today I bought a copy of KING CONAN #11, and I'm sorry to say that I have rarely been so disappointed in the artwork of a Marvel comic. I started buying Marvels back in the sixties, and I've been a fairly faithful follower ever since. I've been an especial fan of the CONAN mags since they first appeared in the seventies. Some of the very finest artwork in comics appeared in your CONAN titles, and I regret that this current issue just wasn't up to par. I'm a very visually-oriented person, and that's perhaps why I still enjoy high quality comics(at age 30 in graduate school),but issue#11just didn't afford me all the pleasure I had paid for. It might be that I've been spoiled by the "greatest" such as Windsor-Smith, Neal Adams, and John Buscema, but I'm hoping you folks can spoil me once more. Please!

Henry J. Vester III
16 Venus Court
Tiburon CA 94920

With an address like Venus Court, Henry, it's easy to see how you might be spoiled on visual pleasures! But seriously, Marvel boasts such a variety of artists that there are bound to be times that one fan's fave is not another fan's rave. As witness the next letter which presents a differing viewpoint...

Dear Doug, Alan, Ernie, etc (King's men all) —

When I first saw Alan Kupperberg's name on the credits of KING CONAN #11, I grew apprehensive. Alan's artwork has a place in Marvel's magazines, but I didn't feel that it was on this particular title. Don't get me wrong, I've often found Alan's work to be very much to my liking. AVENGERS #209 and 212, DR. STRANGE #32, and MARVEL TWO-IN-ONE #75 stand, I feel, with some of the best work done at Marvel. However, I just didn't feel that his style suited Conan.

But... I have a confession to make (Do I have to say it?). I was *wrong!* "The Haunter of the Cenotaph" was extremely well-produced. Doug's writing was superb, as always. Alan's artwork was a welcome surprise, and his layouts on the last half of the story were absolutely superb.

Just a few questions, while I've got your attention:

The Bullpen Bulletins listed this issue's inkers as Steve Mitchell and Ricardo Villamonte, but the book credits list Ernie Chan. Now correct me if I'm wrong, but did all three have a hand in the inking?

Where's John Buscema?

You didn't really kill Cynnera, did you? She's good enough to warrant a return.

Finally, a couple of requests: Bring back Conan's family; keep the beard!; and give Alan Kupperberg a regular book to draw. Thanks for listening.

Greg "Hawkeye" Fuhr
2132 Rae Street
Regina, Saskatchewan,
Canada

John Buscema's back as our CONAN THE BARBARIAN regular penciler, and that, along with the Big One's SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN pencils, takes up a comfortable few hours a week from much-sought-after John. As for the inks on #11... we *goofed.* Earnest Ernie was slated to ink it, but due to other commitments, couldn't. The folks who finally did ink the issue were *Steve Mitchell, Ricardo Villamonte*, and newcomer *Mel Candido.* (Sorry we didn't give ya credit then, guys, for the gorgeous job you did.)

Cynnera, of course, is as dead as you see her. (What's that, you didn't see her corpse in any panel? Well...)

Dear Marvel,

Having just been turned on to KING CONAN, I started my collection with issue #9. Could you tell me where I might purchase back issues #1-8 of the Aquilonian Extravaganza? Thanks, and Make Mine Marvel.

Tony Breland
104 North 5th Stree
Lipscomb, AL 35020

While we folks at Marvel are too wrapped up in our photostats and plot synopses to be able to run a back issue department, there are plenty of specialty shops — in fact they're simply blossoming, bless 'em — all over the country, Tony. Some of them even advertise in these very pages. You'll certainly be able to get those back issues by mail, but, who knows, there may very well be a comic shop right nearby Lipscomb, Alabama itself. Anyone out there know of one?

Dear Captivating Conanites,

I have been reading CONAN and KING CONAN for quite a few years now. In a recent issue I came across something about the return of Elric in Graphic Novel form sometime in early spring. Having thrilled to Elric in the original Moorcock novels and in the CONAN and EPIC adaptations, I just must find out where I can acquire the book to add it to my collection.

Thanks for bringing such wonderful literary joys to a grateful nation of dedicated readers. May your ink never blot and your ideas never cease!

Chris Hunter
617 Mountcastle
Johnson City, TN 37601

Well, Chris, if you follow the instructions outlined to Tony Breland, above, you should be able to get your hands on the new ELRIC GRAPHIC NOVEL quicker than you can say 'Stormbringer!' And while you're at it, you may want to go for broke and pick up our celebrated first graphic novel, Jim Starlin's THE DEATH OF CAPTAIN MARVEL, already in its second printing after the first round sellout!

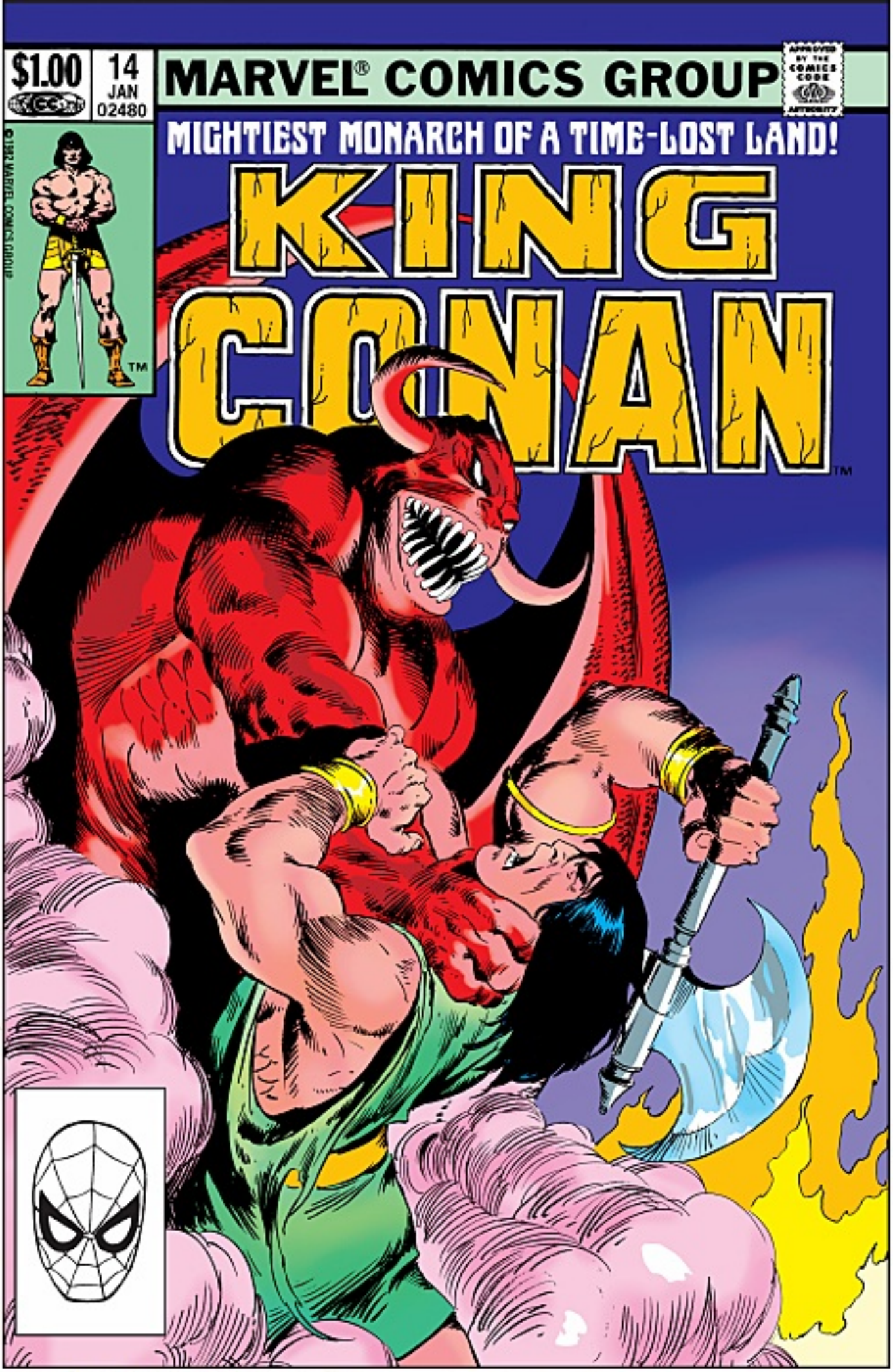
Dear Editors:

KING CONAN #11 did have one flaw in it. When King Conan took his trip to Nemedia, he allowed his beard to grow. I've been following the Marvel Conan books from the start. Time after time, Conan was put into situations where he could not possibly shave for days at a time, yet never so much as developed a five o'clock shadow. After all these years and all these adventures, either you must admit Conan simply does not need to shave — or else do an enormous amount of explaining of those dozens and dozens of times where he never needed one. He had no time, sometimes no water either, sometimes no sharp edge. Add to that the fact that, since the early years, Conan has been colored visibly more ruddy than the other racially white persons shown. Finally, add to that that we know a little of his mother but nothing of his father, and we conclude Conan cannot grow a beard because he is at least partially Pict by race, if not by culture or loyalties. The Picts of course, in the Howardian mythos, are analogous to American Indians, who to this day seldom, if ever, need to shave.

But in any case, for whatever reason, Conan has never needed to shave before — it's too well-established to deny. So how come a beard now?

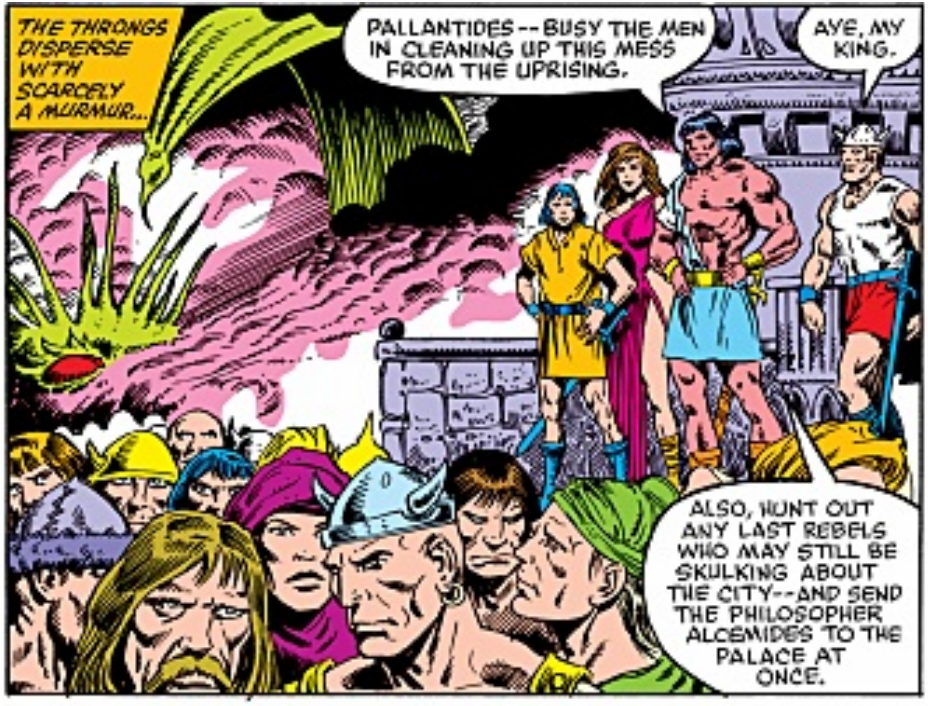
Nichael N. Tierstein
Emory Towers, Apartment 52
Orangeburg, SC 29115

Loyal Conan readers, if we ever needed you, we need you *now!* Help us out of this seemingly insoluble problem, and the keys to Tarantia shall be yours (or at least a No-Prize)! Write quick — we're stumped!



COVER PENCILER & INKER: JOHN BUSCEMA

STan Lee PRESENTS:
KING CONAN
Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD
IN THE PALACE SQUARE OF TARANTIA, CAPITAL OF AQUILONIA, EVIL BURNS IN THE NIGHT...
KINGS of FIRE and DARKNESS
BEHOLD, AQUILONIANS! YOU SEE THE WIZARD URAZAI'S DRAGON IN FLAMES--AND YOU SEE, TOO, THE RESULT OF THE REBELLION WHICH SOUGHT TO UNSEAT ME FROM THE THRONE!
BOTH HAVE FAILED! I STAND BEFORE YOU AS CONAN THE CONQUEROR --YOUR KING AND CONQUEROR NOW AND FOREVER! ONLY THE GODS-- IF SUCH EXIST-- CAN END MY REIGN!
NOW GO-- RETURN TO YOUR HOMES WITHOUT FEAR--AND ENJOY THE PEACE OF A JUST AND STRONG KING!
DOUG MOENCH WRITER
MARK SILVESTRI PENCILER
RICARDO VILLAMONTE INKER
JOE ROSEN LETTERER
GEORGE ROUSSOS COLORIST
LOUISE JONES EDITOR
JIM SHOOTER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF


THE THRONGS DISPERSE WITH SCARCELY A MURMUR...
PALLANTIDES--BUSY THE MEN IN CLEANING UP THIS MESS FROM THE UPRISING.
AYE, MY KING.
ALSO, HUNT OUT ANY LAST REBELS WHO MAY STILL BE SKULKING ABOUT THE CITY--AND SEND THE PHILOSOPHER ALCEMIDES TO THE PALACE AT ONCE.

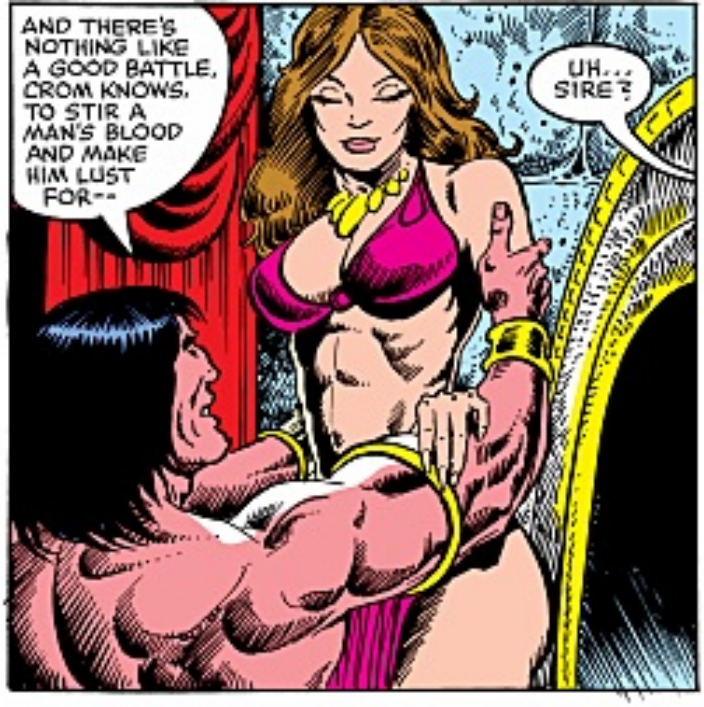
AS FOR US, MY HEIR AND MY QUEEN, IT'S TIME TO LICK OUR WOUNDS... BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE THREATENS THE THRONE.

ELSEWHERE, IN MENACE-LADEN GLOOM...
YOU... AND YOU...

...AND YOU.

IT IS TIME ...FOR THE FEEDING.

--MERE NICKS THIS TIME, MY LOVE, BUT I'VE YET TO SEE ANY CUT DIM THE FIRE OF YOUR GAZE.
IT'S YOUR OWN FAULT, ZENOBIA, FOR BEING THE KIND OF QUEEN YOU ARE--WILLING TO LICK A MAN'S WOUNDS YOURSELF, RATHER THAN LEAVING IT TO SOME HANDMAIDEN...
...OR, WORSE, SOME ADDLED OLD PHYSICIAN.


AND THERE'S NOTHING LIKE A GOOD BATTLE, CROM KNOWS, TO STIR A MAN'S BLOOD AND MAKE HIM LUST FOR--
UH... SIRE?

I... I AM LOATHE TO INTERRUPT, MY KING, BUT YOU GAVE ORDERS...
...TO BE INFORMED OF THE PHILOSOPHER ALCEMIDES' ARRIVAL.

DID I?
THEN MAYHAP IT'S TIME TO RESCIND THOSE ORDERS, SINCE I AM AT THE MOMENT--

NOT NOW, MY HUSBAND. THE AFFAIRS OF STATE EVER TAKE PRECEDENCE.
OH, ALL RIGHT-- SHOW THE OLD MUMBLER IN.

YOU CALLED FOR ME, MY KING?
AYE, ALCEMIDES-- THOUGH I'VE LEARNED IN THE LAST FEW MOMENTS TO REGRET IT.
I-I DO NOT UNDERSTAND, MY LIEGE.
LET IT NOT DISTURB YOU. NOW, TO THE POINT...
I'VE RECENTLY FOUGHT AND SLAIN THREE WIZARDS--NAMED URAZAI, SCYLLANA, AND JUMBASSA--WHO TRIED TO KILL ME...

...AND WHO ALSO ORGANIZED THE REBELLION AGAINST THE CROWN.
THEY CLAIMED AQUILONIA TO BE THE SITE OF SOME TREMENDOUS MYSTICAL FORCE.
KNOW YOU ANYTHING OF THIS FROM YOUR STUDIES?

AH YES, AN ANCIENT MYTH, MY KING...
...AND MAYHAP-- WHO KNOWS?-- MORE THAN A MYTH.
TELL ME.

TO DO THAT, CONAN, I MUST FIRST TELL YOU OF ANDROMEDUS.
WHO--?
KING ANDROMEDUS, MY HUSBAND--AN ANCIENT PREDECESSOR OF YOURS, ONE OF AQUILONIA'S EARLIEST KINGS.
INDEED, QUEEN ZENOBIA--MAYHAP THE GREATEST KING EVER TO STRIDE THIS TROUBLED WORLD...
PRESENT COMPANY EXCLUDED, OF COURSE.
OF COURSE.
NOW STOP YOUR PACING AND *TELL* ME ABOUT THIS WONDROUS KING.
HE WAS A MAN BEYOND ALL OTHER MEN OF HIS TIME...
INDEED, KING ANDROMEDUS WAS A MAN POSSESSED OF SWEEPING VISION--AND THE VAST INTELLIGENCE AND AWESOME STRENGTH TO MOLD THAT VISION INTO REALITY.
"BEFORE HE CAME, AQUILONIA WAS WILDERNESS AND WASTELAND--BUT BY THE TIME HE HAD GONE, A MIGHTY EMPIRE HAD BEEN CARVED FROM NOTHING."
YOU SAY "BEFORE HE HAD GONE"...
GONE *WHERE*, PHILOSOPHER?
NO ONE TRULY KNOWS, MY KING. IN THE ROYAL CRYPTS OF TARANTIA, THE CITY HE BUILT... HIS VAULT ALONE IS EMPTY OF BONES.
AND NONE KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?

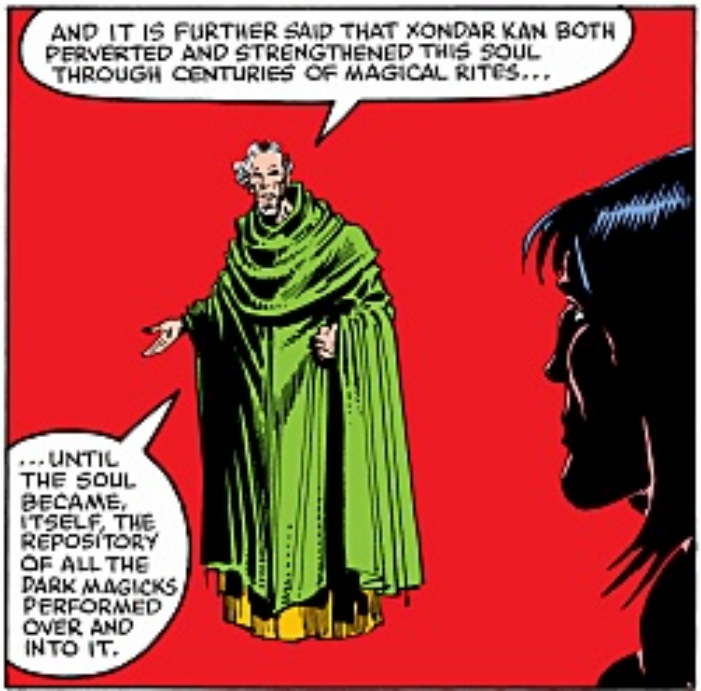
"ALL WE KNOW IS THIS: THAT TROUBLING WORD REACHED HIM, OF DARK POWERS -- MAY-HAP SORCERY -- WREAKING HAVOC TO THE NEAR SOUTH.
"STRANGE DEATHS--MONSTERS --DEVIL CULTS SPRINGING UP-- ALL THREATENING TO UNDERMINE THE GLORIOUS CIVILIZATION HE HAD SO RECENTLY FOUNDED.

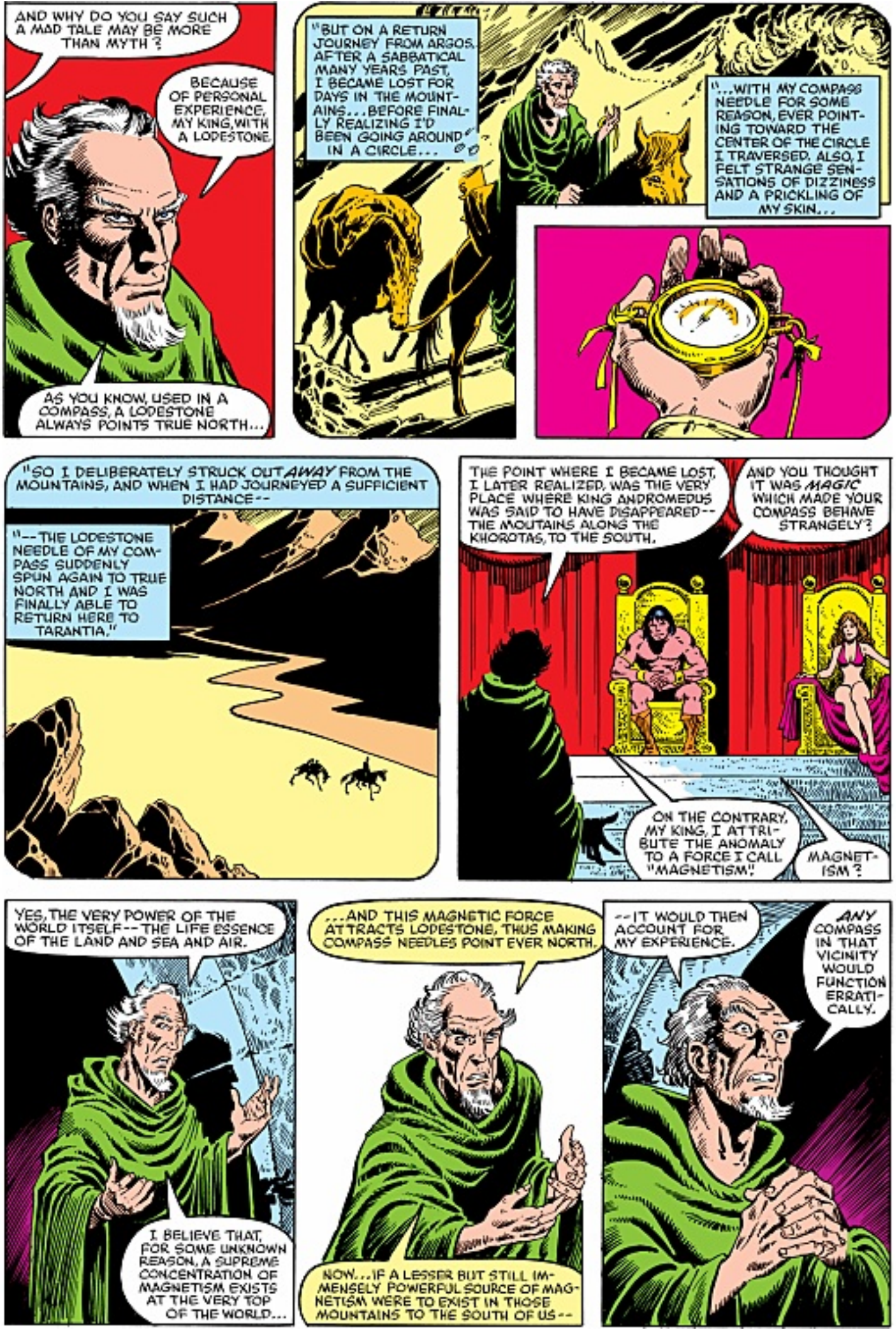
"LIKE YOU, HE WAS NOT A MAN TO DELEGATE DANGER TO OTHERS.
"SO HE ARMED HIMSELF WITH A SILVER-EDGED WAR AXE...

"...AND VENTURED SOUTH WITH A SMALL PARTY OF MEN, TO THE MOUNTAINS ALONG THE KHOROTAS RIVER, NEAR THE VERY HEART OF AQUILONIA."

THE KING WAS NEVER SEEN, NOR HEARD FROM, AGAIN. HIS TOMB VAULT LIES EMPTY, A MERE CENOTAPH.
AND HOW DOES THIS CONCERN AQUILONIA BEING THE SOURCE OF SOME SORCEROUS POWER, AS HINTED BY THE WIZARD URAZAI, WHOSE DRAGON NOW LIES IN ASHES OUTSIDE THIS PALACE?
AH...NOW WE COME TO WHAT MAY OR MAY NOT BE MERE MYTH...

IT IS SAID THAT ANDROMEDUS WAS MET AND CAPTURED BY A SORCERER TO THE SOUTH -- A DEVILISH BEING NAMED *XONDAR KAN*, WHO TORTURED AND ULTIMATELY SLEW ANDROMEDUS...
...BUT WHO THEN MYSTICALLY PRESERVED THE KING'S SOUL, IT BEING A SOURCE OF OVERPOWERING STRENGTH.


AND IT IS FURTHER SAID THAT XONDAR KAN BOTH PERVERTED AND STRENGTHENED THIS SOUL THROUGH CENTURIES OF MAGICAL RITES...
...UNTIL THE SOUL BECAME, ITSELF, THE REPOSITORY OF ALL THE DARK MAGICKS PERFORMED OVER AND INTO IT.


AND WHY DO YOU SAY SUCH A MAD TALE MAY BE MORE THAN MYTH?
BECAUSE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, MY KING, WITH A LODESTONE.
AS YOU KNOW, USED IN A COMPASS, A LODESTONE ALWAYS POINTS TRUE NORTH...
"BUT ON A RETURN JOURNEY FROM ARGOS, AFTER A SABBATICAL MANY YEARS PAST, I BECAME LOST FOR DAYS IN THE MOUNTAINS...BEFORE FINALLY REALIZING I'D BEEN GOING AROUND IN A CIRCLE...
"...WITH MY COMPASS NEEDLE FOR SOME REASON, EVER POINTING TOWARD THE CENTER OF THE CIRCLE I TRAVERSED. ALSO, I FELT STRANGE SENSATIONS OF DIZZINESS AND A PRICKLING OF MY SKIN...
"SO I DELIBERATELY STRUCK OUT *AWAY* FROM THE MOUNTAINS, AND WHEN I HAD JOURNEYED A SUFFICIENT DISTANCE--
"--THE LODESTONE NEEDLE OF MY COMPASS SUDDENLY SPUN AGAIN TO TRUE NORTH AND I WAS FINALLY ABLE TO RETURN HERE TO TARANTIA."
THE POINT WHERE I BECAME LOST, I LATER REALIZED, WAS THE VERY PLACE WHERE KING ANDROMEDUS WAS SAID TO HAVE DISAPPEARED--THE MOUTAINS ALONG THE KHOROTAS, TO THE SOUTH.
AND YOU THOUGHT IT WAS *MAGIC* WHICH MADE YOUR COMPASS BEHAVE STRANGELY?
ON THE CONTRARY, MY KING, I ATTRIBUTE THE ANOMALY TO A FORCE I CALL "MAGNETISM."
MAGNETISM?
YES, THE VERY POWER OF THE WORLD ITSELF--THE LIFE ESSENCE OF THE LAND AND SEA AND AIR.
I BELIEVE THAT, FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON, A SUPREME CONCENTRATION OF MAGNETISM EXISTS AT THE VERY TOP OF THE WORLD...
...AND THIS MAGNETIC FORCE ATTRACTS LODESTONE, THUS MAKING COMPASS NEEDLES POINT EVER NORTH.
NOW...IF A LESSER BUT STILL IMMENSELY POWERFUL SOURCE OF MAGNETISM WERE TO EXIST IN THOSE MOUNTAINS TO THE SOUTH OF US--
--IT WOULD THEN ACCOUNT FOR MY EXPERIENCE.
ANY COMPASS IN THAT VICINITY WOULD FUNCTION ERRATICALLY.

I SEE... AND DO YOU THINK SORCERERS LIKE URAZAI WOULD LUST AFTER THIS "MAGNETISM"? WOULD THEY HAVE A USE FOR IT? COULD IT SOMEHOW STRENGTHEN THEIR MAGICKS?
WHO KNOWS, MY KING?
IF IT IS, IN TRUTH, THE VERY LIFE ESSENCE OF THE WORLD ITSELF--AS I THEORIZE--THEN ITS CAPACITIES MAY WELL BE UNLIMITED, BUT IF ON THE OTHER HAND--
YES, YES--BUT CAN YOU *LEAD* ME TO THIS SITE?

WITHOUT A DOUBT, MY KING, BUT I CAN HARDLY PROMISE TO LEAD YOU *BACK* AGAIN. IF WE SHOULD BECOME LOST, AS I DID THE FIRST TIME, THEN THERE IS NO GUARANTEE WE WILL HAVE THE SAME LUCK IN--

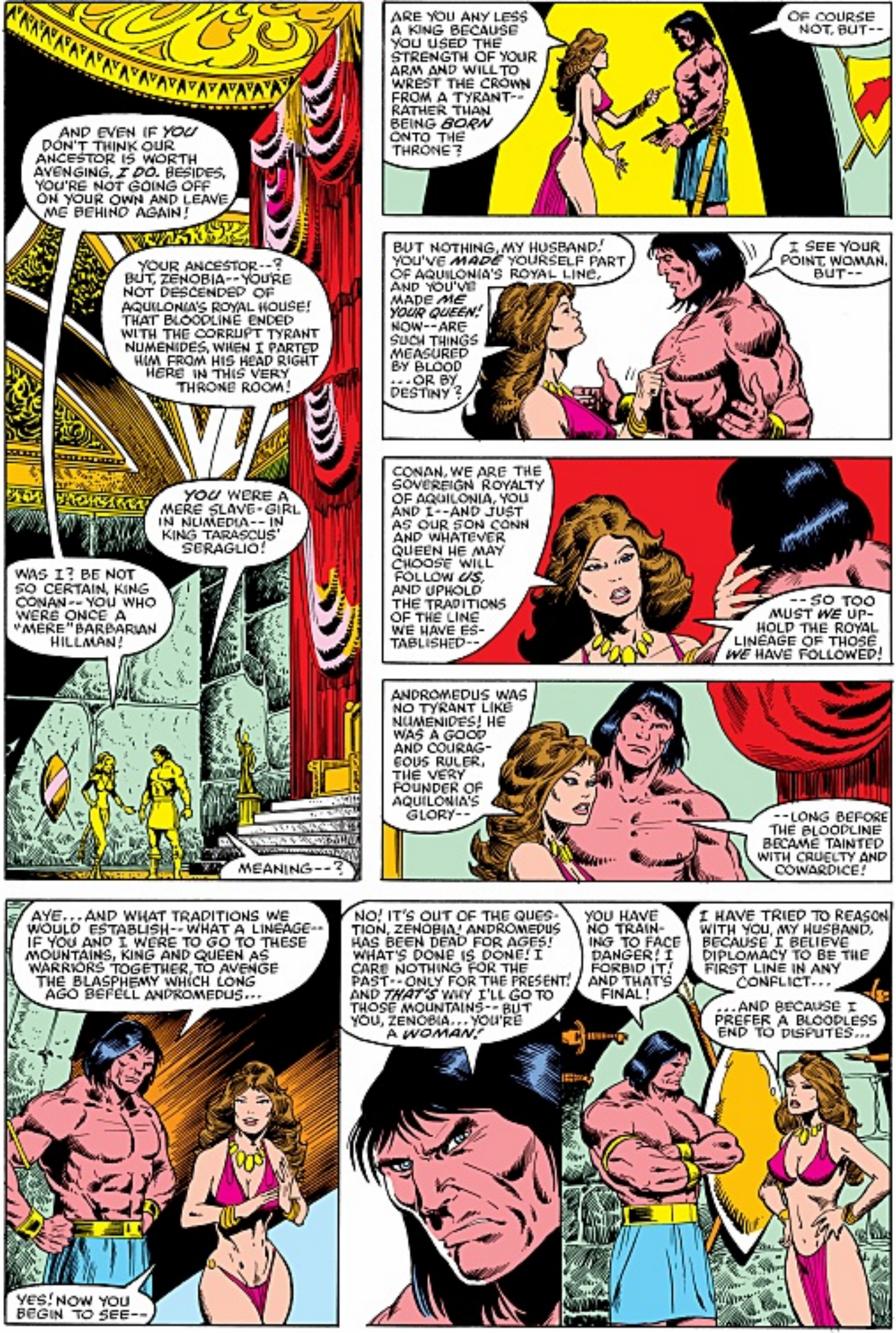
PREPARE YOURSELF FOR AN EXPEDITION, ALCEMIDES, TO DEPART SOON--MAYHAP ON THE MORROW.
Y-YES, MY KING... AS YOU WISH.
AND THE STRANGE PHILOSOPHER SCURRIES FROM THE THRONE ROOM, UNSETTLED BY THE WHIM OF POWER--AND ITS INFLUENCE OVER THE KEEPERS OF THOUGHT.

AGAIN IN GLOOM...
THE THREE CHOSEN ARE DRAGGED TO A HALT AT THE APEX OF A LONG DIZZYING INCLINE.

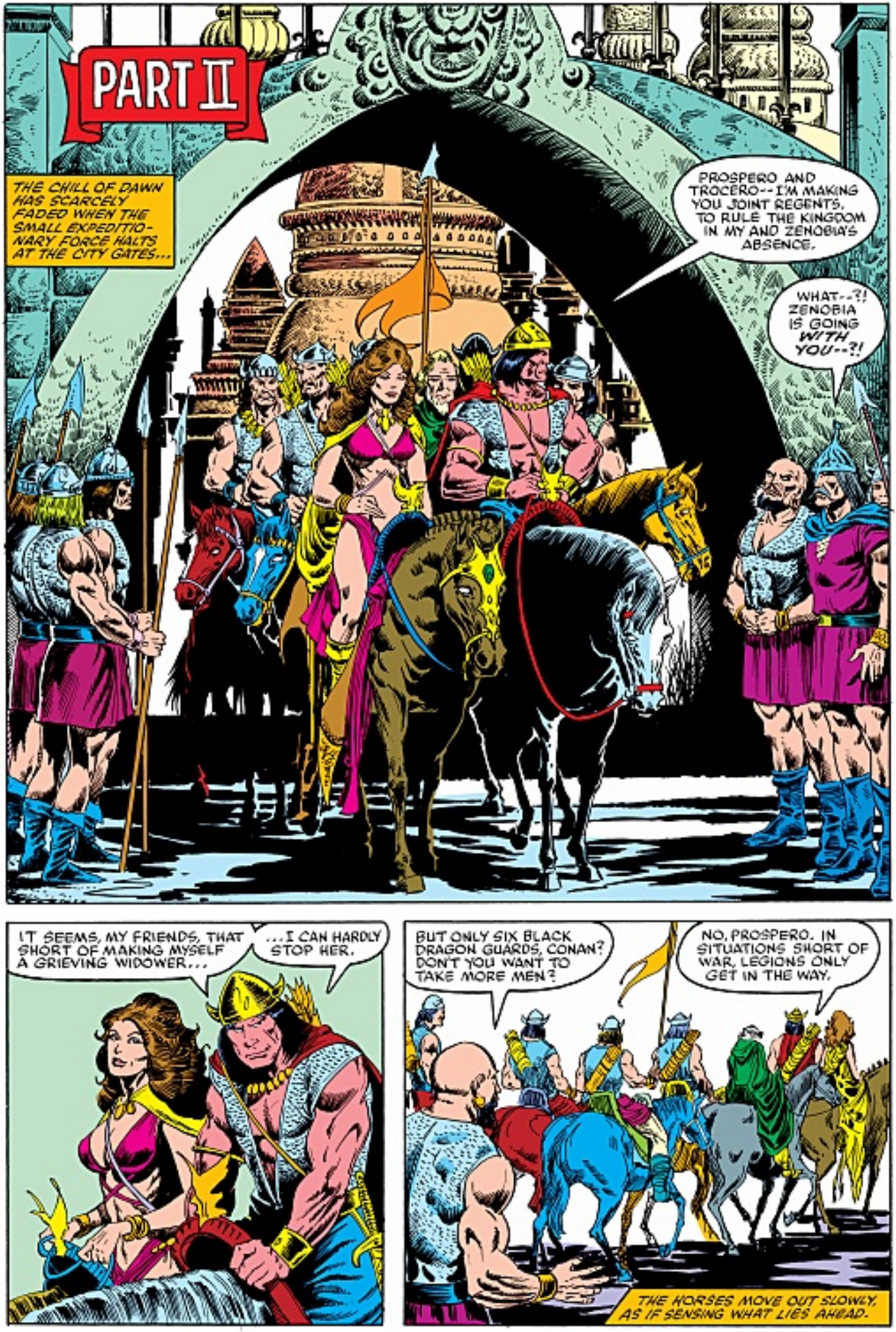
THERE IS BUT A SINGLE MOMENT TO GAPE IN STRICKEN HORROR AT WHAT AWAITS BELOW.

THEN A KICK, STRETCHING TAUT THE CHAIN FROM FIRST NECK TO SECOND...
THUD

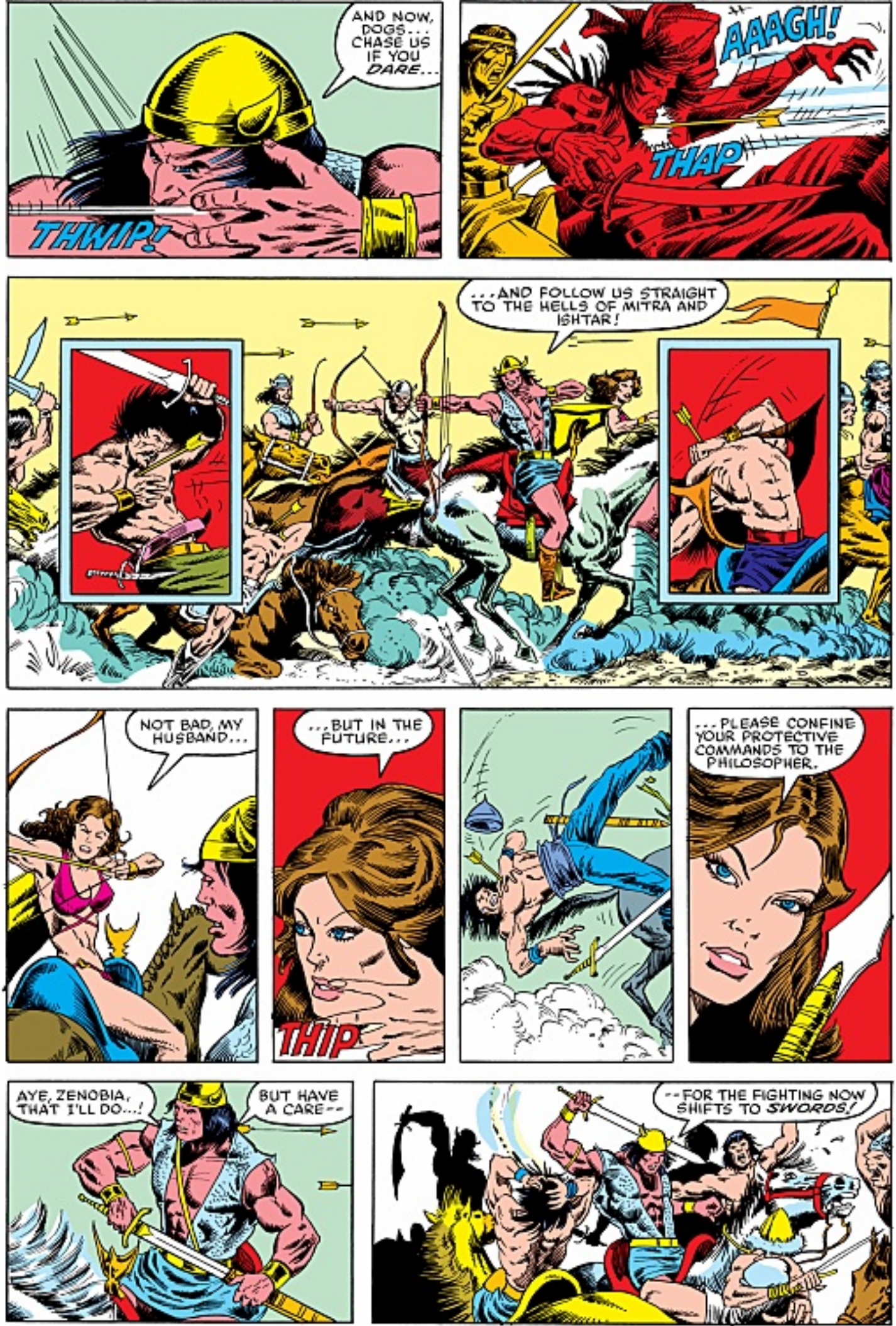
...AND FROM SECOND NECK TO THIRD.
ALL THREE WRETCHED MORSELS PLUMMET.
EEEYYYAAAAAARRRGGHH!
AND AT LAST THE SCREAMS DIE... WETLY.
IF THOSE MOUNTAINS DO HOLD THE POWER URAZAI SPOKE OF, THEN SOMETHING MUST BE DONE ABOUT IT...
EVERY WIZARD WHO LEARNS OF IT WILL EVENTUALLY COME TO AQUILONIA IN HOPES OF CLAIMING IT...
...NO DOUBT DRAGGING ALL MANNER OF FIENDS AND DEVILTRY IN THEIR WAKE.
AYE, CONAN, BUT THERE IS AN EVEN GREATER AND CERTAINLY MORE NOBLE REASON FOR YOUR PLANNED EXPEDITION-- THE HORRIBLE THING DONE TO KING ANDROMEDUS.
IT MUST BE CORRECTED-- AVENGED.
AVENGED? ON WHOM, ZENOBIA? EVEN IF THE MYTH IS TRUE-- EVEN IF A WIZARD DID TURN ANDROMEDUS' SOUL INTO SOME HELLISH POWER-SOURCE-- I COULD HARDLY HOPE TO FIND THE FIEND NOW.
EVEN A SORCERER COULDN'T LIVE THIS LONG.
DON'T BE SO SURE...


AND EVEN IF YOU DON'T THINK OUR ANCESTOR IS WORTH AVENGING, I DO. BESIDES, YOU'RE NOT GOING OFF ON YOUR OWN AND LEAVE ME BEHIND AGAIN!
YOUR ANCESTOR--? BUT, ZENOBIA--YOU'RE NOT DESCENDED OF AQUILONIA'S ROYAL HOUSE! THAT BLOODLINE ENDED WITH THE CORRUPT TYRANT NUMENIDES, WHEN I PARTED HIM FROM HIS HEAD RIGHT HERE IN THIS VERY THRONE ROOM!
YOU WERE A MERE SLAVE-GIRL IN NUMEDIA--IN KING TARASCUS' SERAGLIO!
WAS I? BE NOT SO CERTAIN, KING CONAN--YOU WHO WERE ONCE A "MERE" BARBARIAN HILLMAN!
MEANING--?
ARE YOU ANY LESS A KING BECAUSE YOU USED THE STRENGTH OF YOUR ARM AND WILL TO WREST THE CROWN FROM A TYRANT--RATHER THAN BEING BORN ONTO THE THRONE?
OF COURSE NOT, BUT--
BUT NOTHING, MY HUSBAND! YOU'VE MADE YOURSELF PART OF AQUILONIA'S ROYAL LINE, AND YOU'VE MADE ME YOUR QUEEN! NOW--ARE SUCH THINGS MEASURED BY BLOOD ...OR BY DESTINY?
I SEE YOUR POINT, WOMAN, BUT--
CONAN, WE ARE THE SOVEREIGN ROYALTY OF AQUILONIA, YOU AND I--AND JUST AS OUR SON CONN AND WHATEVER QUEEN HE MAY CHOOSE WILL FOLLOW US, AND UPHOLD THE TRADITIONS OF THE LINE WE HAVE ESTABLISHED--
--SO TOO MUST WE UPHOLD THE ROYAL LINEAGE OF THOSE WE HAVE FOLLOWED!
ANDROMEDUS WAS NO TYRANT LIKE NUMENIDES! HE WAS A GOOD AND COURAGEOUS RULER, THE VERY FOUNDER OF AQUILONIA'S GLORY--
--LONG BEFORE THE BLOODLINE BECAME TAINTED WITH CRUELTY AND COWARDICE!
AYE...AND WHAT TRADITIONS WE WOULD ESTABLISH--WHAT A LINEAGE--IF YOU AND I WERE TO GO TO THESE MOUNTAINS, KING AND QUEEN AS WARRIORS TOGETHER, TO AVENGE THE BLASPHEMY WHICH LONG AGO BEFELL ANDROMEDUS...
YES! NOW YOU BEGIN TO SEE--
NO! IT'S OUT OF THE QUESTION, ZENOBIA! ANDROMEDUS HAS BEEN DEAD FOR AGES! WHAT'S DONE IS DONE! I CARE NOTHING FOR THE PAST--ONLY FOR THE PRESENT! AND THAT'S WHY I'LL GO TO THOSE MOUNTAINS--BUT YOU, ZENOBIA...YOU'RE A WOMAN!
YOU HAVE NO TRAINING TO FACE DANGER! I FORBID IT! AND THAT'S FINAL!
I HAVE TRIED TO REASON WITH YOU, MY HUSBAND, BECAUSE I BELIEVE DIPLOMACY TO BE THE FIRST LINE IN ANY CONFLICT...
...AND BECAUSE I PREFER A BLOODLESS END TO DISPUTES...

...BUT NOW--NOW YOU FORCE ME TO EMPLOY THE ONLY ARGUMENT YOUR THICK SKULL CAN UNDERSTAND!
AND SINCE I'M THE ONE WHO DRESSED YOUR WOUNDS--
EH--?
WHACK!
PUNT
--I'VE EARNED THE RIGHT TO OPEN THEM UP AGAIN, IF THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES!
SMACK!
AND IF YOU DON'T THINK I CAN MORE ABLY ENDURE HARDSHIP THAN OLD ALCEMIDES--
--THEN YOU CAN JUST SIT DOWN ON YOUR THRONE AND THINK AGAIN!
THUD!
HAVE I MADE MY POINT CLEAR?
ZENOBIA, YOU NEVER FAIL TO AMAZE ME. WHERE IN CROM'S HELL DID YOU EVER MASTER SUCH SKILL AT ARMS?
BEFORE I WAS QUEEN TO A STUBBORN KING... AND BEFORE I WAS SOFT FLESH TO THE KEEPER OF A HAREM...
...I WAS DAUGHTER TO A SOLDIER.
MY FATHER ALWAYS WANTED A BOY.
WE LEAVE IN THE MORNING.

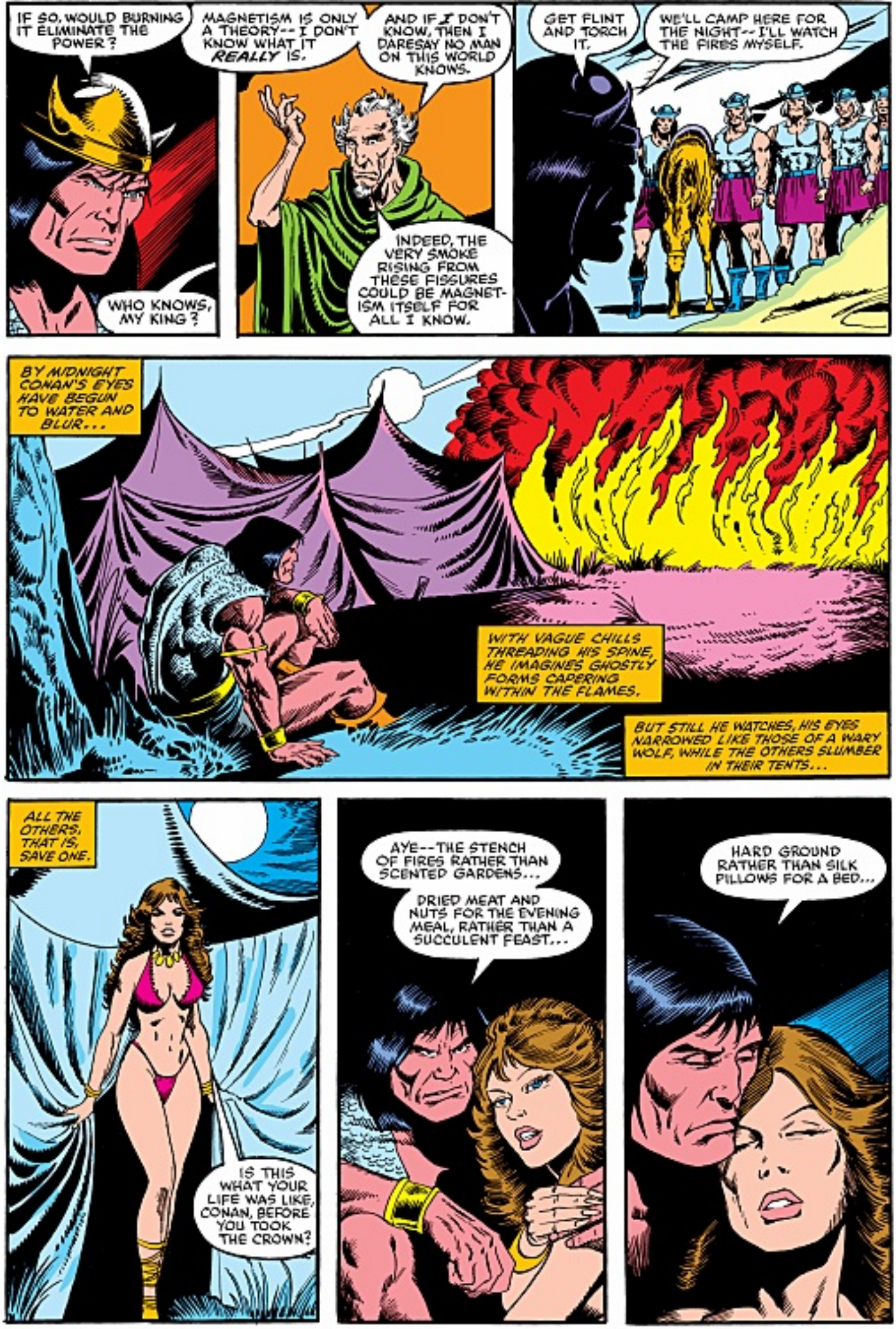

PART II
THE CHILL OF DAWN HAS SCARCELY FADED WHEN THE SMALL EXPEDITIONARY FORCE HALTS AT THE CITY GATES...
PROSPERO AND TROCERO--I'M MAKING YOU JOINT REGENTS, TO RULE THE KINGDOM IN MY AND ZENOBIA'S ABSENCE.
WHAT--?! ZENOBIA IS GOING WITH YOU--?!
IT SEEMS, MY FRIENDS, THAT SHORT OF MAKING MYSELF A GRIEVING WIDOWER...
...I CAN HARDLY STOP HER.
BUT ONLY SIX BLACK DRAGON GUARDS, CONAN? DON'T YOU WANT TO TAKE MORE MEN?
NO, PROSPERO. IN SITUATIONS SHORT OF WAR, LEGIONS ONLY GET IN THE WAY.
THE HORSES MOVE OUT SLOWLY, AS IF SENSING WHAT LIES AHEAD.

FOR TWO DAYS THEY WEAVE THEIR TRAIL THROUGH FOREST AND OVER WASTELAND...
AND ON THE THIRD DAY...
CONAN--!
AYE--WHEN DID IT LAST RAIN?
TWO DAYS PAST.
THEN JUDGING BY THE AMOUNT OF DUST THERE'S AT LEAST TWENTY OF THEM.
NO HOPE IF WE STAND AND FIGHT...
SO ANY FIGHTING WE DO... WILL BE DONE ON THE RUN!
HEEYAH!
ONCE A HILL BANDIT HIMSELF, CONAN WELL KNOWS THEIR WAYS... AND WHAT THEY'D LIKELY DO TO SUCH A SMALL PARTY, KING AND QUEEN OR NOT.
CROM CURSE THIS HILL COUNTRY--FORCING US INTO A PASS! WE'LL HAVE TO OUTRUN THEM ON A SLANT!
AND IF WE DON'T...!
THEY DO--BUT ONLY BY THUNDERING OUT OF THE PASS JUST BARELY AHEAD OF THE SNARLING PACK.
THEIR MOUNTS ARE FRESHER--THEY'LL OVERTAKE US ON THE OPEN GROUND!
BLACK DRAGONS--I HOPE YOU REMEMBER WHAT I TAUGHT YOU ABOUT FIRING FROM A MOVING STEED!
ZENOBIA AND ALCEMIDES--YOU TWO JUST KEEP RIDING AHEAD OF US!


AND NOW, DOGS... CHASE US IF YOU DARE...
THWIP!
AAAGH!
THAP
...AND FOLLOW US STRAIGHT TO THE HELLS OF MITRA AND ISHTAR!
NOT BAD, MY HUSBAND...
...BUT IN THE FUTURE...
THIP
...PLEASE CONFINE YOUR PROTECTIVE COMMANDS TO THE PHILOSOPHER.
AYE, ZENOBIA, THAT I'LL DO...!
BUT HAVE A CARE--
--FOR THE FIGHTING NOW SHIFTS TO SWORDS!

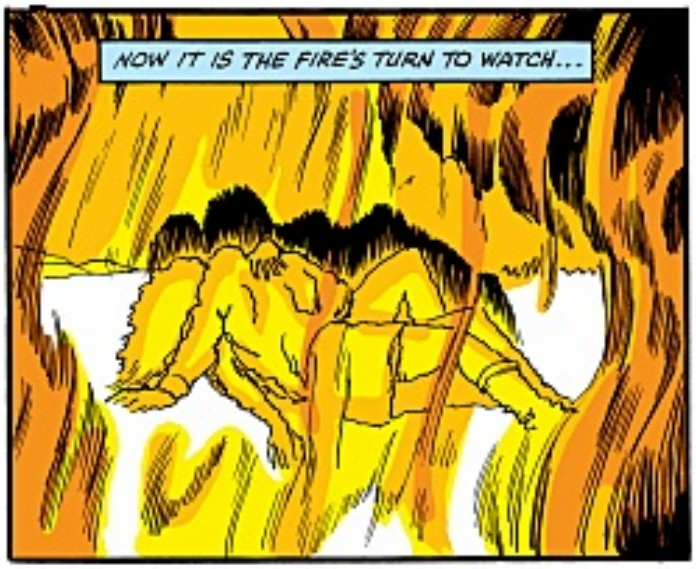
SWORDS, CONAN? I THINK NOT.
I TOLD YOU MY FATHER WAS A SOLDIER...
...BUT HE LED A DIVISION OF ARCHERS.
ZENOBIA!
SPAK
BEHIND YOU!
THE MONARCH HURLS HIS BOW...
...AND NOT A MOMENT...
...TOO SOON!
I DOUBT THE ROYAL HAIRDRESSER WOULD HAVE USED A TULWAR...
...BUT I WAS PLANNING TO HAVE IT CUT.
THEN, QUITE ABRUPTLY...
CONAN! THEY'RE FADING TO A HALT--
--UNWILLING TO GIVE FURTHER CHASE!
AYE, SO THEY ARE, THE CRAVEN DOGS...
BUT WHY--?
THERE, CONAN--THE ANSWER LIES BEFORE US!

THE MOUNTAINS-- THEN AT LEAST THERE'S SOMETHING THOSE JACKALS FEAR...
AND MY COMPASS, MY LIEGE! IF ANYTHING, THE MAGNETIC DISTURBANCE HAS GROWN STRONGER SINCE I WAS LAST HERE.
YOU SEE--? THE NEEDLE POINTS SOUTH--THE VERY OPPOSITE OF ITS TRUE ORIENTATION!
LET'S MOVE ON ALCEMIDES.
AND TELL ME WHEN THE COMPASS GOES WILD AGAIN!
HERE, CONAN, BY THIS FLATTENED PEAK...
THE COMPASS IS SPINNING CRAZILY!
MAYHAP THIS SMOKE-- OR WHATEVER LIES IN THE FISSURES-- IS CAUSING IT...
OWTCH!
HOT PITCH...
PSSSST!
...AND ENOUGH OF IT TO BURN WELL AND LONG, PERHAPS FOR YEARS--
-- JUST LIKE THE SUBSTANCE WE POURED DOWN THE GRAVES, INTO THE TOMBS UNDER TARANTIA.
AND COULD THIS PITCH BE THE SOURCE OF YOUR "MAGNETISM," ALCEMIDES?
OH, I DOUBT THAT, CONAN-- PITCH HAS NEVER BEEN KNOWN TO AFFECT A COMPASS...
BUT THEN AGAIN, PERHAPS IN SUFFICIENTLY MASSIVE AMOUNTS... WELL, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE.


IF SO, WOULD BURNING IT ELIMINATE THE POWER?
WHO KNOWS, MY KING?
MAGNETISM IS ONLY A THEORY-- I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT REALLY IS.
AND IF I DON'T KNOW, THEN I DARESAY NO MAN ON THIS WORLD KNOWS.
INDEED, THE VERY SMOKE RISING FROM THESE FISSURES COULD BE MAGNETISM ITSELF FOR ALL I KNOW.
GET FLINT AND TORCH IT.
WE'LL CAMP HERE FOR THE NIGHT-- I'LL WATCH THE FIRES MYSELF.
BY MIDNIGHT CONAN'S EYES HAVE BEGUN TO WATER AND BLUR...
WITH VAGUE CHILLS THREADING HIS SPINE, HE IMAGINES GHOSTLY FORMS CAPERING WITHIN THE FLAMES.
BUT STILL HE WATCHES, HIS EYES NARROWED LIKE THOSE OF A WARY WOLF, WHILE THE OTHERS SLUMBER IN THEIR TENTS...
ALL THE OTHERS, THAT IS, SAVE ONE.
IS THIS WHAT YOUR LIFE WAS LIKE, CONAN, BEFORE YOU TOOK THE CROWN?
AYE--THE STENCH OF FIRES RATHER THAN SCENTED GARDENS...
DRIED MEAT AND NUTS FOR THE EVENING MEAL, RATHER THAN A SUCCULENT FEAST...
HARD GROUND RATHER THAN SILK PILLOWS FOR A BED...

YOU MISS IT, DON'T YOU?
AYE.

THEN LET'S RECAPTURE SOME OF IT, BARBARIAN MAN...
...WHILE WE CAN.


NOW IT IS THE FIRE'S TURN TO WATCH...

AND WHEN IT IS OVER, CONAN DRAPES HER IN HIS CLOAK--
--AND, AGAIN MESMERIZED, HE PACES TOWARD THE FLAMES...

...AS HIS WILD IMAGININGS CROSS THE THRESHOLD OF REALITY.
CROM'S DEVILS! THERE IS SORCERY HERE--!

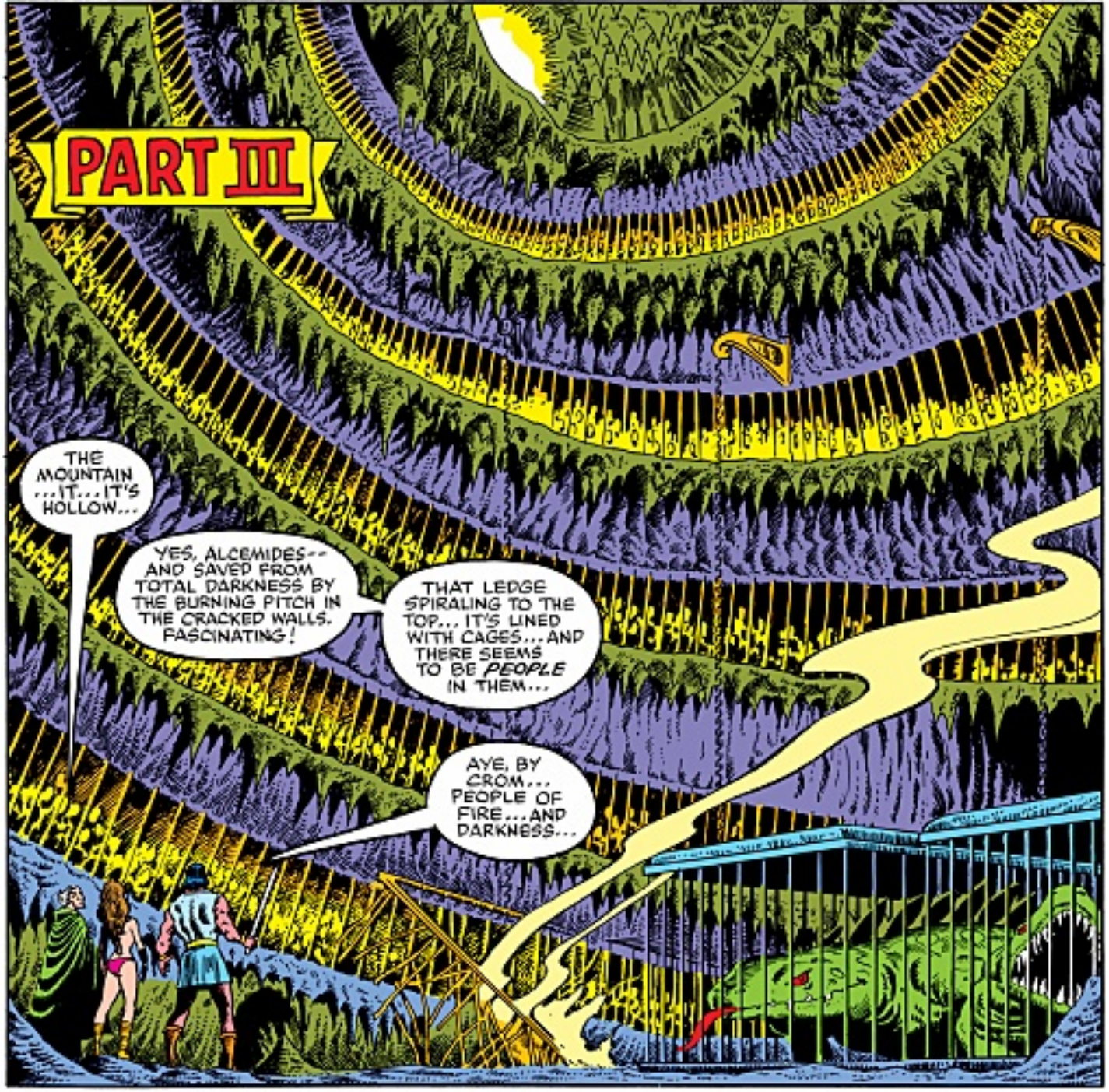
AND THE FIRE IS BURNING IT RIGHT OUT OF THE VERY GROUND--TO ATTACK ME!

HE SLASHES--
--AND THE DEMON-GHOSTS LAUGH.
SPARE YOUR SWORD, FLESH-MAN! WE ARE BEYOND FEELING!
AFTER THE AGONY OF OUR UNION WITH THE UNDEAD ONE, NO FEELING COULD POSSIBLY TOUCH US-- AND NOW WE HAVE BEEN FREED BY THE FLAMES...
...TO VISIT OUR TORMENT UPON THE WORLD OF THE LIVING!
THEIR LAUGHTER, THEIR BITTER WORDS, TURN HIS BLOOD TO ICE, AND HE IS ABOUT TO CRY OUT FOR HELP...
...WHEN THE GROUND SUDDENLY QUAKES...
...AND THE APPAR-ITIONS, FLOWING INTO FIERCE WINDS, ARE SUCKED BACK TO HELL.
MITRA AND ISHTAR! WHAT--?
THE CRACKING GROUND EXPLODES, SLEWING AND TUMBLING FROM THE BROAD BACK OF A RISING MONSTER, DRIVEN BY THE FLAMES TO A HEIGHT OF RAGE...
RROOAARR
TRUE, THE MENACE IS NOW MORE SUBSTANTIAL...
...BUT HARDLY LESS DANGEROUS, AND ONLY A TRIFLE LESS TERRIFYING.

ZENOBIA, ALCEMIDES-- FLEE!
BLACK DRAGONS-- TO ARMS!
THEY STUMBLE FROM THE TENTS, BLADES ALREADY IN HAND--
--BUT NOT YET SURE IF THIS BURNING NIGHTMARE IS STILL A PART OF THEIR DREAMS...
...OR SOME FAR MORE RUDE AND TERRIBLE AWAKENING.
SH-RAK!
INTO THIS CLEFT AT THE BASE OF THE PEAK, ZENOBIA-- AND STAY WITH ALCEMIDES!
THE KING THEN WHIRLS, AS IF TO JOIN THE FRAY--
AAAEEE!!!
--ONLY TO FIND IT ALREADY ENDED.
HE IS IN TIME TO SEE HIS LAST TWO MEN SCREAM THEIR WAY INTO DEATH.

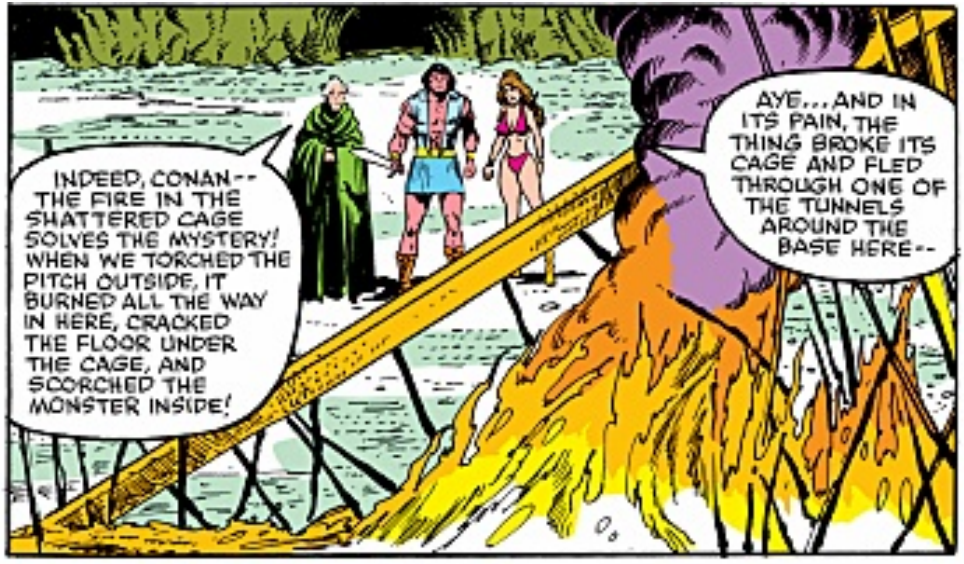
NOOOOOO
THAT'S ALL, BY CROM! WE LEAVE NOW WHILE WE STILL CAN!
NO, CONAN! WE CAN'T LEAVE NOW THAT WE'VE FOUND WHAT WE CAME FOR-- THE SOURCE OF THE SORCERY!
DON'T YOU SEE?! WE CAN'T LEAVE UNTIL WE AVENGE KING ANDROMEDUS!
ANDROMEDUS IS IN HELL, WOMAN-- LEAVE HIM THERE! OR WOULD YOU JOIN HIM IN THE FIRES?! DON'T YOU SEE--?
I CARE NOTHING ABOUT SOME KING WHO PERISHED AGES PAST! I CARE ONLY ABOUT US, ONLY ABOUT THE HERE AND N--
THE LENGTH OF YOUR ARGUMENT HAS ALREADY DECIDED THE ISSUE-- IT'S TOO LATE TO FLEE!
HHSSSS
AYE, AGED ONE-- IT'S TRAPPED US HERE IN THE CLEFT...
BUT BY CROM, ITS MOUTH WILL TASTE MORE THAN ONE STING--
-- BEFORE IT SETTLES ON ITS MEAL!
CHOMP!
MITRA!

DIE, MONSTER!
WHY WON'T YOU--
ANOTHER QUAKE!
KKRBOOOOM
--DIE?!
IT'S OPENING THE CLEFT INTO A TUNNEL--A PASSAGE-WAY INTO THE HEART OF THE MOUNTAIN!
IF WE WERE TO FOLLOW IT--
YES, MY QUEEN...
IT MAY BE OUR ONLY CHANCE FOR ESCAPE FROM THE MONSTER!
COME, CONAN--QUICKLY!
AT LEAST OUR WAY IS LIT BY THE FLICKERING FIRES...
AYE-- JUST HAVE A CARE WHERE YOU STEP.
QUIETLY NOW--THERE'S A CIRCLE OF GREATER LIGHT AHEAD. LET'S SEE WHAT IT IS...


PART III
THE MOUNTAIN ...IT... IT'S HOLLOW...
YES, ALCEMIDES-- AND SAVED FROM TOTAL DARKNESS BY THE BURNING PITCH IN THE CRACKED WALLS. FASCINATING!
THAT LEDGE SPIRALING TO THE TOP... IT'S LINED WITH CAGES... AND THERE SEEMS TO BE PEOPLE IN THEM...
AYE, BY CROM... PEOPLE OF FIRE... AND DARKNESS...

THE ONES CLOSEST TO THE GROUND SEEM TO BE INFANTS... AND HIGHER UP, THERE ARE CHILDREN...
STILL HIGHER ARE YOUTHS... AND NO DOUBT THE ONES NEAR THE TOP ARE ADULTS...

AT THE MOMENT, ZENOBIA, I'M MORE INTERESTED IN THESE TWO CAGED MONSTERS...
THEY LOOK TO BE BROTHERS OF THE THING WE FACED OUTSIDE...


INDEED, CONAN-- THE FIRE IN THE SHATTERED CAGE SOLVES THE MYSTERY! WHEN WE TORCHED THE PITCH OUTSIDE, IT BURNED ALL THE WAY IN HERE, CRACKED THE FLOOR UNDER THE CAGE, AND SCORCHED THE MONSTER INSIDE!
AYE... AND IN ITS PAIN, THE THING BROKE ITS CAGE AND FLED THROUGH ONE OF THE TUNNELS AROUND THE BASE HERE--

--UNTIL IT BURST UP THROUGH THE GROUND OUTSIDE.
SO WE HAVE ONLY OURSELVES TO BLAME FOR--

WAIT! LOOK THERE!
AND THERE! AND--

YES--MOVEMENT FROM ALL THE TUNNELS...

...ALL AROUND US...
WHATEVER THEY ARE, THEY HAVE US SURROUNDED, CONAN...

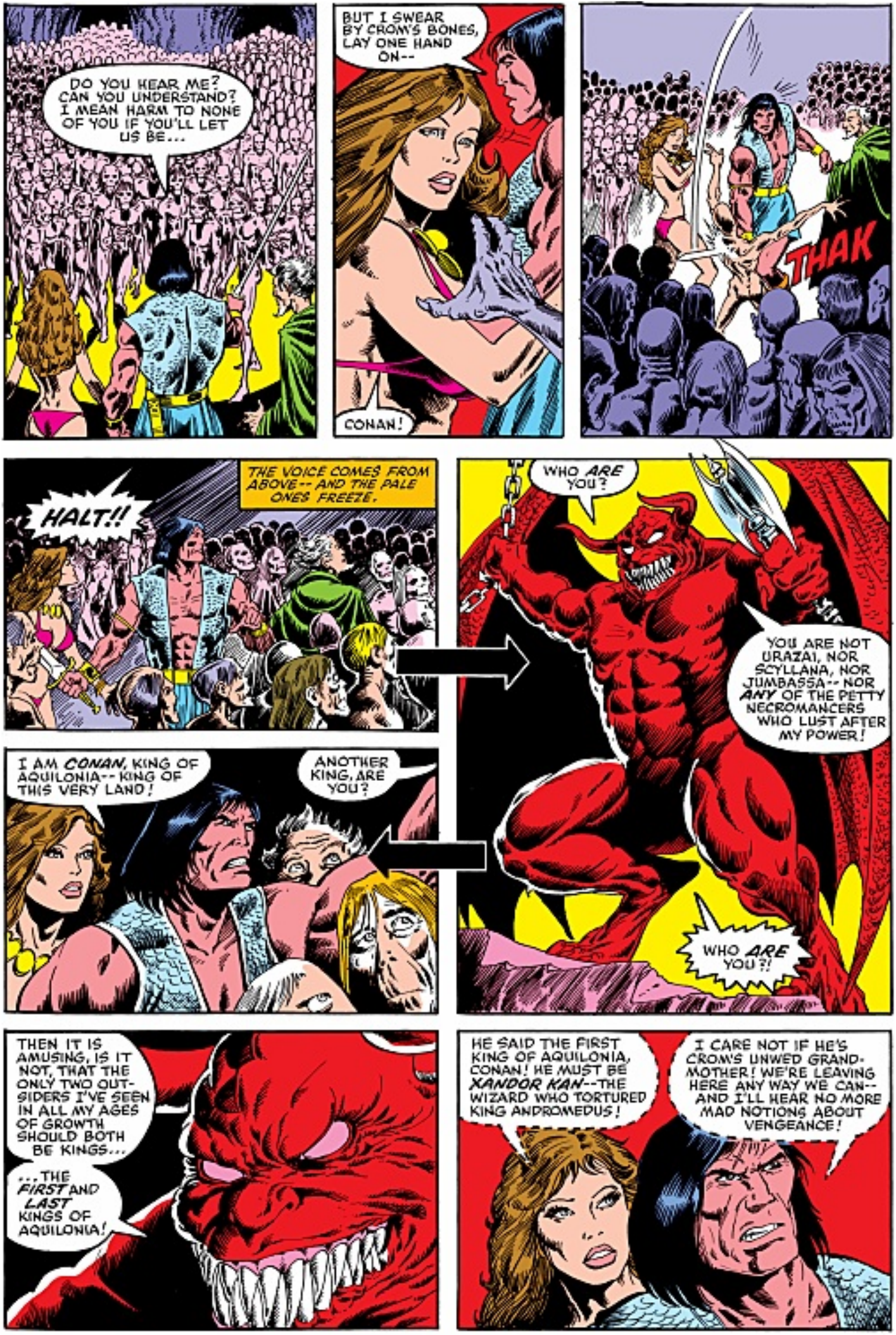
...AND THEY'RE COMING OUT... CLOSING IN ON US!
SHRUNKEN AND SHRIVELED, THEIR SKIN DRIED PARCHMENT STRETCHED TAUT OVER BONE--

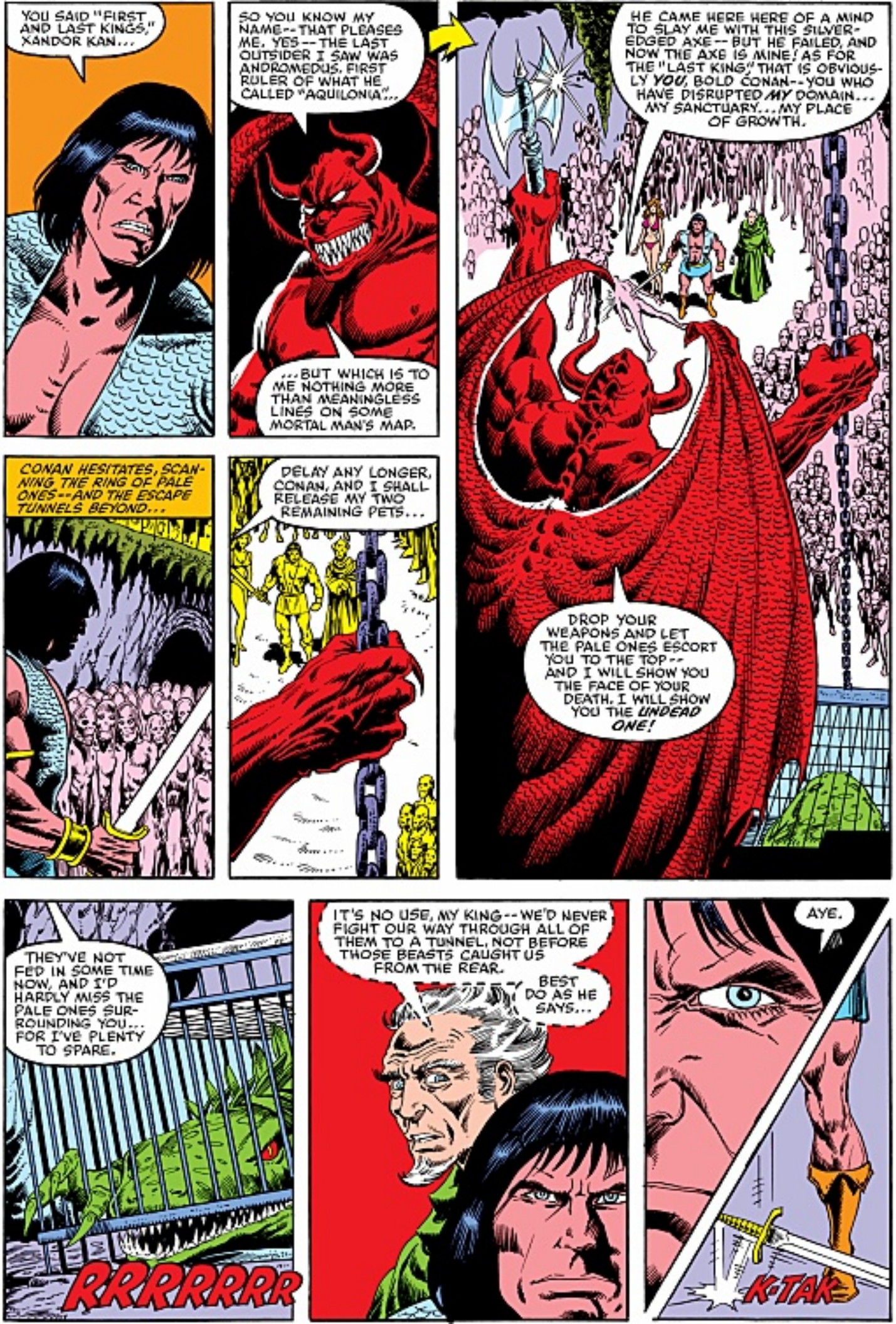
-- THEY SHAMBLE LURCHINGLY FROM MOUTHS OF DARKNESS.
STAY BACK, ZENOBIA.
I'LL DEAL WITH THE THINGS.

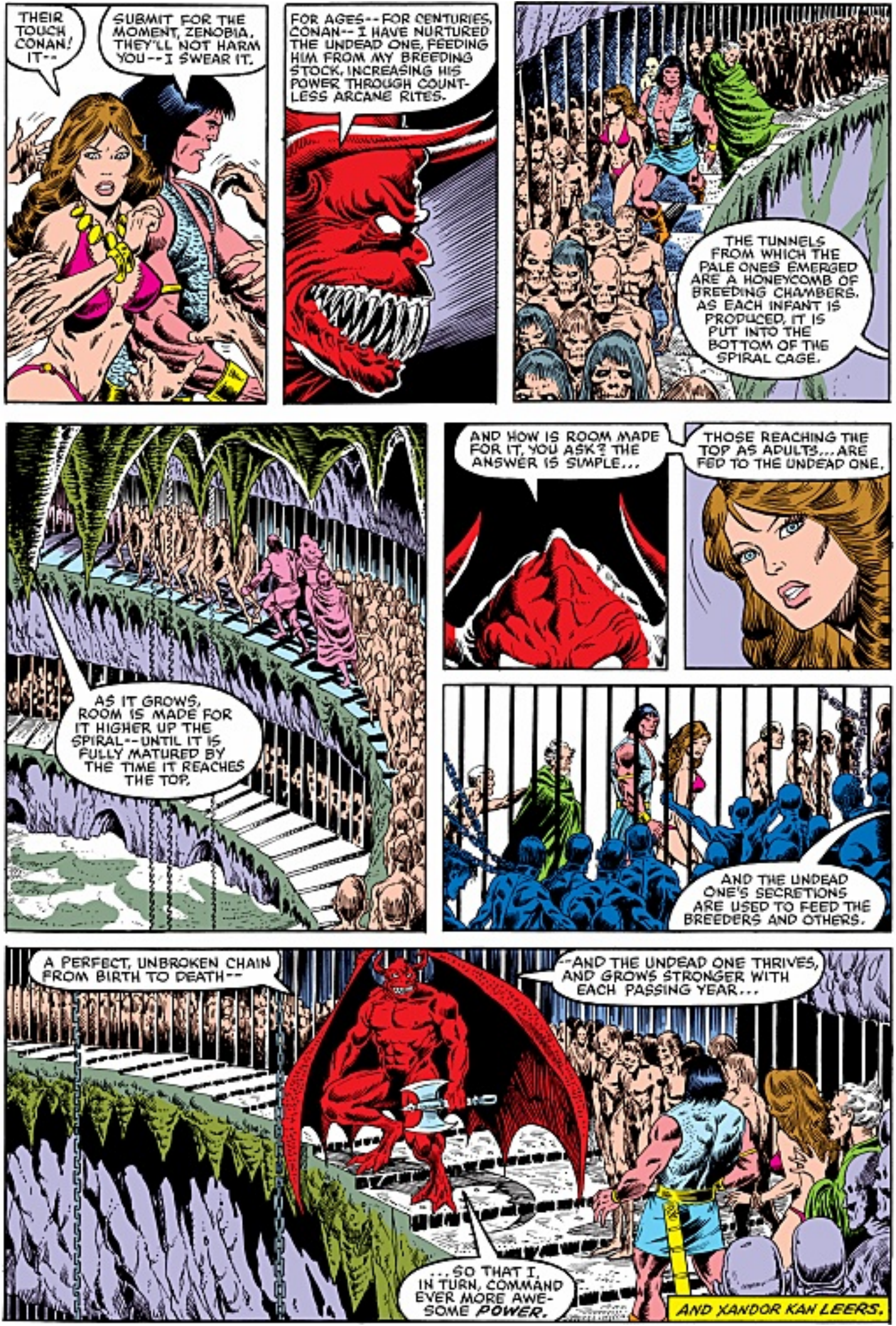
HALT! NOT A STEP CLOSER, BY CROM, OR I'LL CLEAVE YOUR HIDEOUS SKULLS IN TWAIN!

THEY'RE DISEASED, CONAN--AS PALLID AS DEATH! THEY... THEY'VE NEVER SEEN THE SUN...!

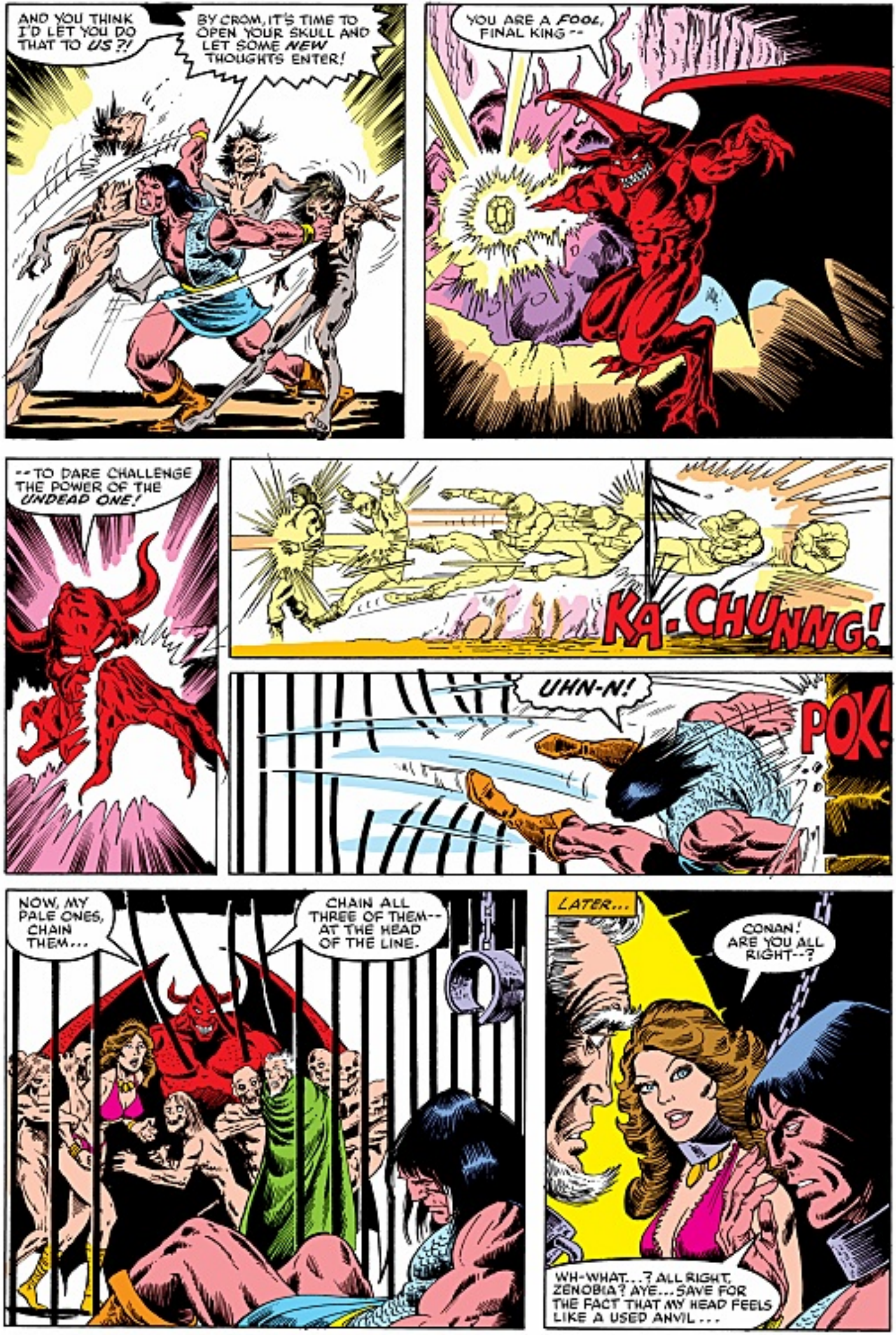
AYE--NOR WILL THEY EVER SEE IT IF THEY DON'T HALT WHERE THEY ARE!


DO YOU HEAR ME? CAN YOU UNDERSTAND? I MEAN HARM TO NONE OF YOU IF YOU'LL LET US BE...
BUT I SWEAR BY CROM'S BONES, LAY ONE HAND ON--
CONAN!
THAK
HALT!!
THE VOICE COMES FROM ABOVE-- AND THE PALE ONES FREEZE.
WHO ARE YOU?
YOU ARE NOT URAZAI, NOR SCYLLANA, NOR JUMBASSA-- NOR ANY OF THE PETTY NECROMANCERS WHO LUST AFTER MY POWER!
WHO ARE YOU?!
I AM CONAN, KING OF AQUILONIA-- KING OF THIS VERY LAND!
ANOTHER KING, ARE YOU?
THEN IT IS AMUSING, IS IT NOT, THAT THE ONLY TWO OUTSIDERS I'VE SEEN IN ALL MY AGES OF GROWTH SHOULD BOTH BE KINGS...
...THE FIRST AND LAST KINGS OF AQUILONIA!
HE SAID THE FIRST KING OF AQUILONIA, CONAN! HE MUST BE XANDOR KAN--THE WIZARD WHO TORTURED KING ANDROMEDUS!
I CARE NOT IF HE'S CROM'S UNWED GRANDMOTHER! WE'RE LEAVING HERE ANY WAY WE CAN-- AND I'LL HEAR NO MORE MAD NOTIONS ABOUT VENGEANCE!


YOU SAID "FIRST AND LAST KINGS," XANDOR KAN...
SO YOU KNOW MY NAME--THAT PLEASES ME. YES--THE LAST OUTSIDER I SAW WAS ANDROMEDUS, FIRST RULER OF WHAT HE CALLED "AQUILONIA"...
...BUT WHICH IS TO ME NOTHING MORE THAN MEANINGLESS LINES ON SOME MORTAL MAN'S MAP.
HE CAME HERE HERE OF A MIND TO SLAY ME WITH THIS SILVER-EDGED AXE--BUT HE FAILED, AND NOW THE AXE IS MINE! AS FOR THE "LAST KING," THAT IS OBVIOUSLY YOU, BOLD CONAN--YOU WHO HAVE DISRUPTED MY DOMAIN... MY SANCTUARY... MY PLACE OF GROWTH.
DROP YOUR WEAPONS AND LET THE PALE ONES ESCORT YOU TO THE TOP--AND I WILL SHOW YOU THE FACE OF YOUR DEATH. I WILL SHOW YOU THE UNDEAD ONE!
CONAN HESITATES, SCANNING THE RING OF PALE ONES--AND THE ESCAPE TUNNELS BEYOND...
DELAY ANY LONGER, CONAN, AND I SHALL RELEASE MY TWO REMAINING PETS...
THEY'VE NOT FED IN SOME TIME NOW, AND I'D HARDLY MISS THE PALE ONES SURROUNDING YOU... FOR I'VE PLENTY TO SPARE.
RRRRRRR
IT'S NO USE, MY KING--WE'D NEVER FIGHT OUR WAY THROUGH ALL OF THEM TO A TUNNEL, NOT BEFORE THOSE BEASTS CAUGHT US FROM THE REAR.
BEST DO AS HE SAYS...
AYE.
K-TAK


THEIR TOUCH, CONAN! IT--
SUBMIT FOR THE MOMENT, ZENOBIA, THEY'LL NOT HARM YOU--I SWEAR IT.
FOR AGES--FOR CENTURIES, CONAN--I HAVE NURTURED THE UNDEAD ONE, FEEDING HIM FROM MY BREEDING STOCK, INCREASING HIS POWER THROUGH COUNTLESS ARCANE RITES.
THE TUNNELS FROM WHICH THE PALE ONES EMERGED ARE A HONEYCOMB OF BREEDING CHAMBERS. AS EACH INFANT IS PRODUCED, IT IS PUT INTO THE BOTTOM OF THE SPIRAL CAGE.
AS IT GROWS, ROOM IS MADE FOR IT HIGHER UP THE SPIRAL--UNTIL IT IS FULLY MATURED BY THE TIME IT REACHES THE TOP.
AND HOW IS ROOM MADE FOR IT, YOU ASK? THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE...
THOSE REACHING THE TOP AS ADULTS...ARE FED TO THE UNDEAD ONE.
AND THE UNDEAD ONE'S SECRETIONS ARE USED TO FEED THE BREEDERS AND OTHERS.
A PERFECT, UNBROKEN CHAIN FROM BIRTH TO DEATH--
--AND THE UNDEAD ONE THRIVES, AND GROWS STRONGER WITH EACH PASSING YEAR...
...SO THAT I, IN TURN, COMMAND EVER MORE AWESOME POWER.
AND XANDOR KAN LEERS.

ONE DAY THE UNDEAD ONE WILL HAVE ALL THE POWER I NEED--
--AND I SHALL EMERGE AT LAST FROM MY MOUNTAIN FASTNESS TO ENSLAVE AND COMMAND EVERY MAGE AND SHAMAN IN THE WORLD...
...AND THEN SHALL ALL THE MIGHTY NATIONS FALL TO MY ARMY...THEN SHALL THE WORLD BE CONQUERED IN FIRE AND DARKNESS!
AND THAT DAY WILL COME PERHAPS EVEN SOONER THAN I DREAMED, CONAN-- PERHAPS AS SOON AS THE UNDEAD ONE FEASTS UPON THE STRENGTH OF YOUR HEART, FINAL KING OF AQUILONIA!
YOU MEAN TO... TO FEED US... TO THIS...THIS THING?!
ON THE MORROW, FINAL KING, IN WHAT MAY WELL BE ITS FINAL RITE OF FEEDING.
TONIGHT, WHEN I JOIN WITH IT TO RENEW MYSELF... I WILL KNOW WHETHER ITS POWER IS COMPLETE AND READY TO BE UNLEASHED.
FOR NOW, I SHALL LET YOU WITNESS WHAT AWAITS YOU.
ALL OF YOU.
THE THREE ARE UN-SHACKLED AND DRAGGED TO THE EDGE OF THE PIT.
IT IS TIME...
AAEEE
...FOR THE UNDEAD ONE'S FEEDING.
THE FLESH IS ABSORBED WITHIN MOMENTS...
...AND THE PULSATING MASS GLOWS BRIGHTER.

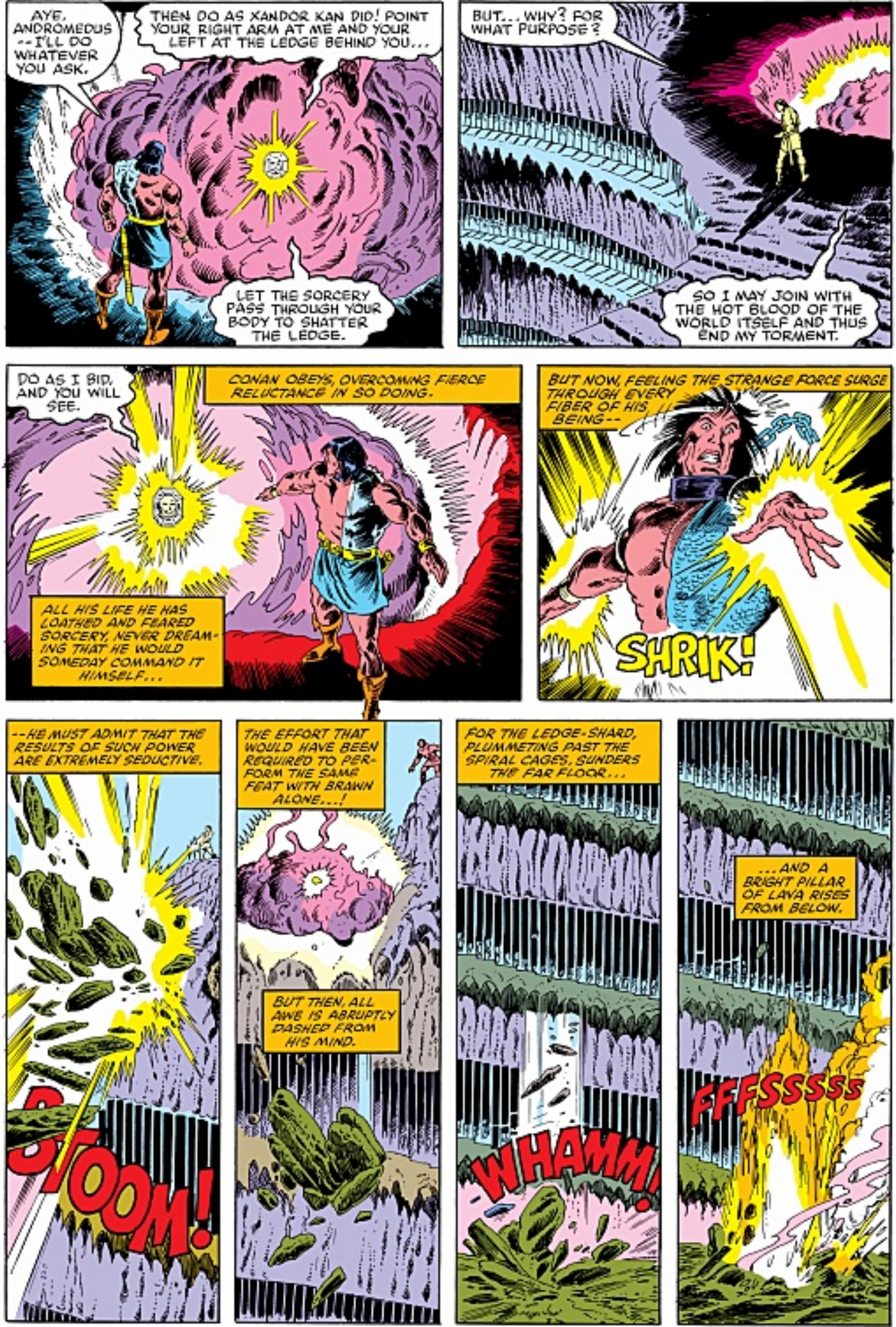

AND YOU THINK I'D LET YOU DO THAT TO US?!
BY CROM, IT'S TIME TO OPEN YOUR SKULL AND LET SOME NEW THOUGHTS ENTER!
YOU ARE A FOOL, FINAL KING --
--TO DARE CHALLENGE THE POWER OF THE UNDEAD ONE!
KA-CHUNNG!
UHN-N!
POK!
NOW, MY PALE ONES, CHAIN THEM...
CHAIN ALL THREE OF THEM-- AT THE HEAD OF THE LINE.
LATER...
CONAN! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT--?
WH-WHAT...? ALL RIGHT, ZENOBIA? AYE... SAVE FOR THE FACT THAT MY HEAD FEELS LIKE A USED ANVIL...

THE BOLTS ARE TOO SECURE! HOW LONG HAVE I BEEN OUT, ALCEMIDES?
LONG ENOUGH, MY KING, FOR XANDOR KAN TO BEGIN HIS RITES OF RENEWAL...
YOU SEE--? THAT'S HOW HE HAS MANAGED TO LIVE SO LONG! HE DRAWS STRENGTH--LIFE ITSELF--FROM THAT...THAT THING!
AND LOOK--THE UNDEAD ONE IS THE SOURCE OF THE MAGNETISM, OR SOME OTHER FORCE, WHICH ATTRACTS LODESTONE! THE COMPASS POINTS DIRECTLY AT IT!
THE WAY XANDOR KAN BREEDS THESE PITIFUL CREATURES LIKE CATTLE TO FEED HIS FOUL POWER--
--HE MUST BE STOPPED! IF HE DID THIS TO ANDROMEDUS--
HE'LL BE STOPPED--BUT SPARE ME ANY MORE ABOUT ANDROMEDUS. I'VE NEVER EVEN MET THE MAN AND ALREADY I HATE HIM.
PRAISE MITRA YOU ORDERED THE PITCH TO BE TORCHED, CONAN!
EH--?
IT'S BURNED ALL THE WAY UP HERE--AND IT'S CRACKING THE WALL!
AYE, PHILOSOPHER ...SO IT IS!
KLANG!
STAY HERE.
I'LL BE BACK TO FREE YOU--
--AS SOON AS I FIND THAT SILVER AXE.
THEN, WITH XANDOR KAN STILL IMMERSED IN HIS RENEWAL, CONAN SLIPS FROM THE SPIRAL CAGE...!
...AND STOOPS TO HEFT A LARGE ROCK...

KRAK
MY THANKS, KING CONAN, FOR FREEING ME AT LAST FROM HIS DARK SPELL.
THUD!
EH?! YOU... YOU CAN SPEAK?!
AYE, AND I AM AWARE OF ALL THAT HAS TRANSPIRED SINCE YOU ARRIVED IN THIS HELLISH PLACE...
...AND AWARE, TOO, OF ETERNITIES BEFORE THAT...

FOR YOU SEE, I AM YOUR PREDECESSOR... THE FIRST OF YOUR LINE...
IN TRUTH, I AM ALL THAT REMAINS OF KING ANDROMEDUS.
WHAT?! CROM'S DEVILS, BUT--
LISTEN, CONAN, AND HEED ME WELL! I AM THE PERVERTED LIFE ESSENCE OF MY FORMER SOUL! YOU CANNOT IMAGINE WHAT XANDOR KAN HAS DONE TO ME, WHAT HELLISH RITES HAVE BEEN PERFORMED OVER ME...
...WHAT DARK SORCERIES HAVE BEEN FORCED INTO ME--ALL TO MY ABIDING AND ENDURING TORMENT!

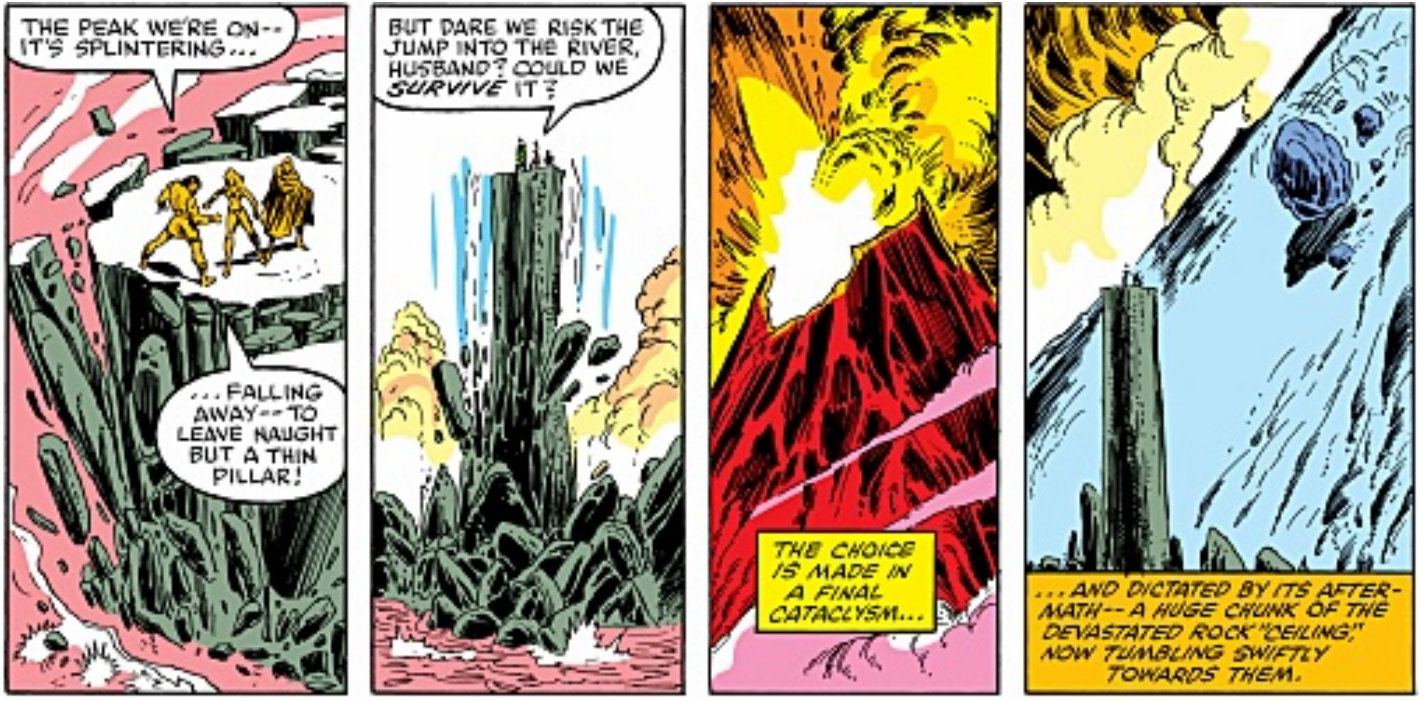
AND SOON... SOON WILL COME THE CRUELEST BLASPHEMY OF ALL--WHEN HE USES ME TO DESTROY THE VERY KINGDOM I CREATED...
AYE, AND THE REST OF THE WORLD BEYOND...
...UNLESS YOU DESTROY ME FIRST --IN MERCY--TO PRESERVE THE WORLD WE BOTH HOLD TO BE SACRED.
AS YOUR KING, I BEG OF YOU-- DESTROY ME, MY KING!
AT FIRST HE CLAIMED TO CARE NOTHING FOR THE BEING CALLED ANDROMEDUS...
RECENTLY, HE HAS PROFESSED ACTUAL HATRED.
BUT NOW... NOW...!


AYE, ANDROMEDUS --I'LL DO WHATEVER YOU ASK.
THEN DO AS XANDOR KAN DID! POINT YOUR RIGHT ARM AT ME AND YOUR LEFT AT THE LEDGE BEHIND YOU...
LET THE SORCERY PASS THROUGH YOUR BODY TO SHATTER THE LEDGE.
BUT...WHY? FOR WHAT PURPOSE?
SO I MAY JOIN WITH THE HOT BLOOD OF THE WORLD ITSELF AND THUS END MY TORMENT.
DO AS I BID, AND YOU WILL SEE.
CONAN OBEYS, OVERCOMING FIERCE RELUCTANCE IN SO DOING.
ALL HIS LIFE HE HAS LOATHED AND FEARED SORCERY, NEVER DREAMING THAT HE WOULD SOMEDAY COMMAND IT HIMSELF...
BUT NOW, FEELING THE STRANGE FORCE SURGE THROUGH EVERY FIBER OF HIS BEING--
SHRIK!
--HE MUST ADMIT THAT THE RESULTS OF SUCH POWER ARE EXTREMELY SEDUCTIVE.
KOOM!
THE EFFORT THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN REQUIRED TO PERFORM THE SAME FEAT WITH BRAWN ALONE...!
BUT THEN, ALL AWE IS ABRUPTLY DASHED FROM HIS MIND.
FOR THE LEDGE-SHARD, PLUMMETING PAST THE SPIRAL CAGES, SUNDERS THE FAR FLOOR...
WHAMM!
...AND A BRIGHT PILLAR OF LAVA RISES FROM BELOW.
FFFSSSSS

MOLTEN FIRE--WELLING UP--RISING HIGHER! BUT THE PALE ONES--TRAPPED IN THE CAGES!
AYE, CONAN. I KNOW...
THEY ARE DESCENDANTS OF THE SOLDIERS WHO CAME WITH ME TO BATTLE XANDOR KAN, AND OF HILLWOMEN HE ABDUCTED FROM THEIR HUTS--BUT THEIR TORMENT, TOO, IS BETTER ENDED IN UNION WITH THE WORLD'S BLOOD.
NOW HURL ME, KING CONAN, INTO THE RISING SEA OF FIRE!
HURL YOU--? AYE, ANDROMEDUS...
BUT FIRST I MUST FREE MY QUEEN--AND ALCEMIDES!
YET, EVEN AS HE SWIFTLY SHATTERS THEIR NECK CHAINS...
CONAN--!
EH--?
...XANDOR KAN RISES.
QUICKLY, CONAN--OR I WILL AGAIN FALL UNDER HIS THRALL! STOP HIM--AND END IT! END MY HORROR BEFORE--
SILENCE, UNDEAD ONE! YOU ARE ALREADY MINE!
NOT IF I CAN HELP IT, DEVIL-SPAWN!
THE AXE CATCHES THE DEMON FULL FORCE...
...AND TOPPLES HIM FROM THE PRECIPICE.
BUT THE WOUND, THOUGH PAINFUL, IS NOT A MORTAL ONE...

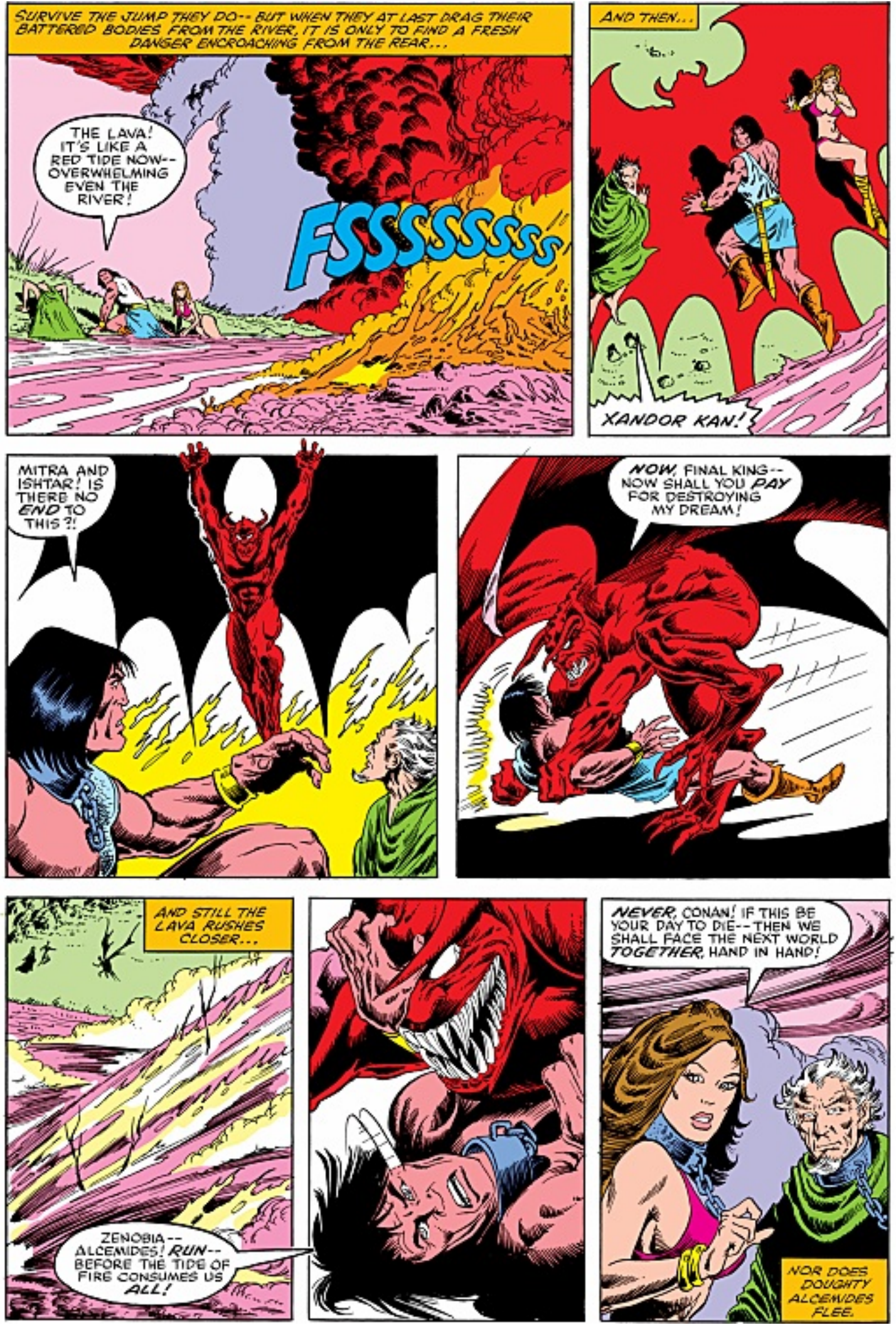
...AND XANDOR KAN, FALLING BUT ONE LEVEL OF THE SPIRAL LEDGE, HALTS HIMSELF...
...AND THEN, EVEN AS THE MOUNTAIN TREMBLES, BEGINS HIS INEXORABLE CLIMB BACK TOWARD THE SUMMIT.
GET TO ANDROMEDUS, CONAN! HURL HIM DOWN-- QUICKLY--
--BEFORE XANDOR KAN MAKES HIS WAY BACK UP!
AYE, ZENOBIA...
...THOUGH I KNOW NOT IF I HAVE THE STRENGTH!
IF YOU HAVE THE WILL, FELLOW KING--
--THEN YOU SHALL FIND THE STRENGTH!
A NOBLE NOTION, ANDROMEDUS...
...AND ONE THAT I'VE ALWAYS SHARED!
YOU AND I, IT SEEMS, HAVE MUCH IN COMMON!
MUCH, YES-- BUT NOT THIS.
THE UNDEAD ONE-- THE THING THAT ONCE WAS ANDROMEDUS-- BREAKS THE SURFACE OF THE MOLTEN FLOOR...
SSSSSSSSS
AND, AS IF A CATALYST TOWARD DOOM, IT CAUSES THE MOUNTAIN TO QUAKE MORE VIOLENTLY.
THE LAVA RISES FASTER, CONSUMING THOSE PALE ONES IN THE LOWER STATIONS OF THE SPIRAL CAGES...

AND GAPING RENTS SPLIT THE WALLS NEAR THE SUMMIT...
THERE, MY KING-- WHERE YOU RIPPED YOUR CHAIN FROM THE WALL! THE CRACK IS WIDENING...!
THEN IT'S A WAY OUT-- AND LET THE RISING POOL OF FIRE TAKE XANDOR KAN!
THEY BREAK INTO CLEAN AIR AS ANOTHER VIOLENT TREMOR NEARLY SHAKES THEM FROM THEIR FEET...
THE MOUNTAIN IS A VOLCANO-- AND IT'S ABOUT TO ERUPT!
THE CEILING-- IT MUST BE NOTHING MORE THAN A "CORK" OF SOLIDIFIED LAVA! AND THE LAVA MUST HAVE THEN SUBSIDED TO THE FLOOR LEVEL--
RRRRUURRMMBBLL
--WHERE IT SOLIDIFIED AGAIN, LEAVING THE CENTER OF THE VOLCANO HOLLOW!
BUT NOW THE POWER OF ANDROMEDUS' SOUL IS FILLING THE MOUNTAIN WITH FURY!
RRRRMMB
IT...IT'S GOING TO MAKE IT--
"--EXPLODE!"
WABOOOM
IMM
BUT MORE THAN HARDENED LAVA ERUPS FROM THE SHATTERING MOUNTAIN...
AWESOME EVIL, AS WELL FLIES FREE.

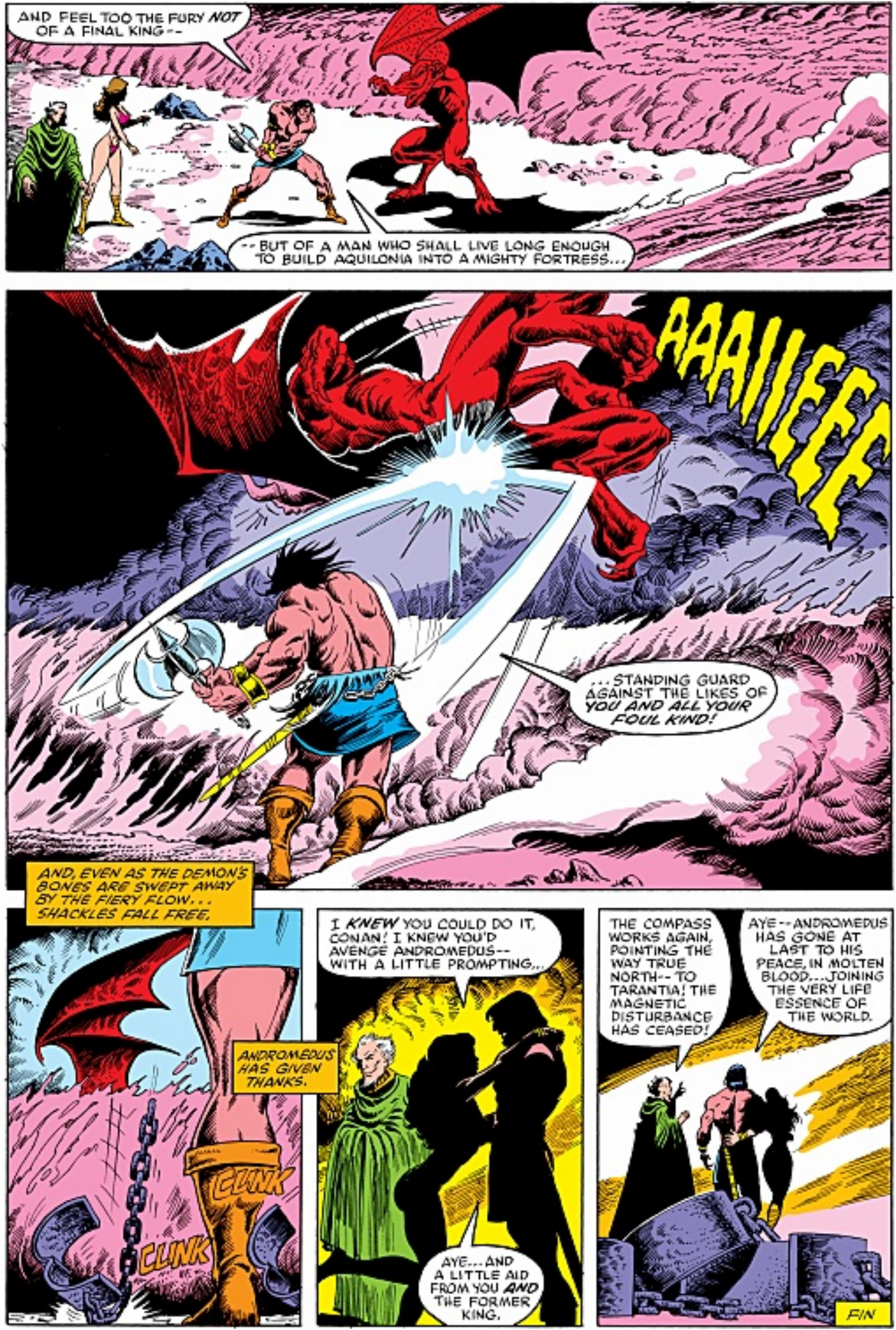

THE PEAK WE'RE ON-- IT'S SPLINTERING...
...FALLING AWAY-- TO LEAVE NAUGHT BUT A THIN PILLAR!
BUT DARE WE RISK THE JUMP INTO THE RIVER, HUSBAND? COULD WE SURVIVE IT?
THE CHOICE IS MADE IN A FINAL CATACLYSM...
...AND DICTATED BY ITS AFTERMATH-- A HUGE CHUNK OF THE DEVASTATED ROCK "CEILING," NOW TUMBLING SWIFTLY TOWARDS THEM.

CONAN LOOKS ONCE AT THE BOULDER--
--AND ONCE AT THE RUSHING WATERS OF THE KHOROTAS RIVER BELOW...
THE TIME HAS COME, ZENOBIA--
--TO FIND OUT!

KRABASSH!


SURVIVE THE JUMP THEY DO-- BUT WHEN THEY AT LAST DRAG THEIR BATTERED BODIES FROM THE RIVER, IT IS ONLY TO FIND A FRESH DANGER ENCROACHING FROM THE REAR...
THE LAVA! IT'S LIKE A RED TIDE NOW-- OVERWHELMING EVEN THE RIVER!
FSSSSSSSS
AND THEN...
XANDOR KAN!
MITRA AND ISHTAR! IS THERE NO END TO THIS?!
NOW, FINAL KING-- NOW SHALL YOU PAY FOR DESTROYING MY DREAM!
AND STILL THE LAVA RUSHES CLOSER...
ZENOBIA-- ALCEMIDES! RUN-- BEFORE THE TIDE OF FIRE CONSUMES US ALL!
NEVER, CONAN! IF THIS BE YOUR DAY TO DIE-- THEN WE SHALL FACE THE NEXT WORLD TOGETHER, HAND IN HAND!
NOR DOES DOUGHTY ALCEMIDES FLEE.

THEN THE LAVA IS UPON THEM, NOT EVEN A YARD AWAY, STEAMING AND BURBLING WITH A HEAT TO MELT FLESH FROM BONE...
ZENOBIA AND ALCEMIDES BRACE THEMSELVES FOR AN END IN AGONY.
BUT SUCH AN END NEVER COMES, NOT THIS DAY...
SSWOOSH
INSTEAD, THEY OPEN DISBELIEVING EYES TO FIND THE LAVA FLOW SPLIT IN TWAIN.
AND FROM THE VERY FORK A SILVER AXE IS SOMEHOW HURLED.
ANDROMEDUS--! HE'S AIDING US--EVEN AS HE DIES--GIVING US OUR SALVATION, CONAN, EVEN AS YOU GAVE HIM HIS!
REACH OUT, MY HUSBAND--
--AND TAKE IT!
NOW, FIEND OF FIENDS--FEEL THE SURE BITE OF SILVER!
TASTE THE AXE OF ANDROMEDUS!


AND FEEL TOO THE FURY NOT OF A FINAL KING--
--BUT OF A MAN WHO SHALL LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO BUILD AQUILONIA INTO A MIGHTY FORTRESS...
AAAIIEEE
...STANDING GUARD AGAINST THE LIKES OF YOU AND ALL YOUR FOUL KIND!
AND, EVEN AS THE DEMON'S BONES ARE SWEPT AWAY BY THE FIERY FLOW... SHACKLES FALL FREE.
CLINK
CLINK
ANDROMEDUS HAS GIVEN THANKS.
I KNEW YOU COULD DO IT, CONAN! I KNEW YOU'D AVENGE ANDROMEDUS-- WITH A LITTLE PROMPTING...
AYE... AND A LITTLE AID FROM YOU AND THE FORMER KING.
THE COMPASS WORKS AGAIN, POINTING THE WAY TRUE NORTH-- TO TARANTIA! THE MAGNETIC DISTURBANCE HAS CEASED!
AYE--ANDROMEDUS HAS GONE AT LAST TO HIS PEACE, IN MOLTEN BLOOD...JOINING THE VERY LIFE ESSENCE OF THE WORLD.
FIN

KING CONAN

% MARVEL COMICS GROUP
387 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

LOUISE JONES
EDITOR
DANNY FINGEROTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Louise,

I'm pleased to say that the switch from quarterly to bi-monthly publication has not hurt the quality of the series at all. Doug Moench continues to turn out some fine stories, the current issue: #12's "The Tombs Under Tarantia" being a fine example. What sets KING CONAN apart from the other two Conan mags is its regular cast of supporting characters which Doug uses most effectively, especially Prince Conn. The character Darweena was also cleverly incorporated into the plot this issue via Mimus's reserve magic spell. To top things off, Ron Frenz and Ricardo Villamonte did a very good job on the artwork, most notably on the cover.

On to a few suggestions. I think it would be interesting to see Conan return to Cimmeria, accompanied by Conn. I'll bet Doug could weave a good tale out of that premise. Another interesting idea would be to depict Aquilonia in a major war with one of its neighboring states, but with little or no sorcery involved in the conflict, just realistic strategies and battle formations and the like. Finally, I don't think you need feel compelled to turn out a thirty-eight page story each issue. Although I prefer the longer stories, I think it would be a great idea to print two shorter stories on occasion. This would give Conn a chance at solo stories as well as permit King Kull or Red Sonja back-ups. Consider it.

Gino D'Ambrosio
4651 S. Austin
Seattle, WA 98118

You're right about the supporting cast setting this book apart, Gino. That, along with the mood we're able to create by a fixed place setting, Aquilonia, gives the KING CONAN stories a quite different feel from the tales of the youthful wanderer. As for your suggestions, each of them is worth considering, and you can be sure you'll find much to your satisfaction in issues ahead.

Dear Sword Swingers,

KING CONAN #12 was super! Ron Frenz's art was wonderful, and Doug Moench's script was at its usual level of perfection.

One question: on page 11, panel 9, the two children with Zenobia — are they more of the King's heirs, or was the queen babysitting?

Edward Fields
200 Moore's Lake Road
Wadesboro, NC 28170

Those little tykes are indeed the future Conans of Aquilonia, Edward. You'll be seeing more of them in the future.

Dear Louise,

Hoo-hah! I said it before and I'll say it again: hang on to Ron Frenz. Without a doubt, he is one of the most talented newcomers in the business. He's obviously a student of the work of John Buscema, and that's definitely okay with me! Ricardo Villamonte'ss inking was great too, leaving an almost Ploogish look to a number of pages. In all honesty, I feel that someone like Pablo Marcos is more suited for inking these pages, but Ricardo pleasantly surprised me. With all this going for the art, how could I be less than entertained? Give Ron a regular pencil job, okay? I'd love to see his stuff on a super hero mag.

Don't think I've forgotten Doug Moench either. His work here has been superb. Doug brings believability and compassion to the dialogue and characters, although Darweena's sudden defense of king and country seemed a touch too convenient. But I'm ecstatic that someone's finally turning Zenobia into more than a cardboard character. The outburst on page 29 was the first sign of real emothion we've seen from this character. Sometimes writers get too caught up in plying readers with exotic scenery and fight scenes to remember to breathe life into their entire cast. Thank you, Doug. I hope that you continue to focus on these things and that we start seeing a bit of palace intrigue. That's what I miss! A bit of skullduggery is due for an appearance, methinks.

Even though I've enjoyed all the recent issues' artwork, I'd like to see a regular creative team at work on KING CONAN. See what you can do.

P.S. How about "Mightiest Letters of a Time Lost Page" for a lettercol title? Hee hee hee.

Greg "Hawkeye" Fuhr
2132 Rae Street
Regina, Saskatchewan
Canada

Well, how will dazzling Doug Moench, mighty Mark Silvestri, and rollicking Ricardo Villamonte do for openers on our regular lineup, Greg? With these three steering the helm, you'll be seeing even more of the characterization, mood and plots you've been praising above. And that's what makes the world of comical-type books go 'round, right?

Dear Louise,

KING CONAN #12 was undoubtedly a success. The story was well scripted above an excellent plot, and the artwork was also superb. I have only one complaint — I would like to move beyond sorcerers, demons, and evil spirits for awhile. How about a little change of pace in the near future?

Ryan McGaughy
15 Upper Falls Creek Road
Elma, WA 98541

Well, it's time for the ballot box again, folks, and this time we want to hear from each and every one of you out there: more sorcery or less? It seems there's a real live issue here, so let's start taking sides now. And hopefully by the time we're ready to print the results, there'll be a real title to the column in these pages. Our next reader suggests a few in the body of the following letter...

Dear KING CONAN Crew,

KING CONAN #12 was a feast for mind and eye! I will really miss John Buscema's work on these pages, but Ron Frenz's breakdowns sort of had the Buscema touch. And Ricardo Villamonte's embellishment gave body and solidity to the artwork.

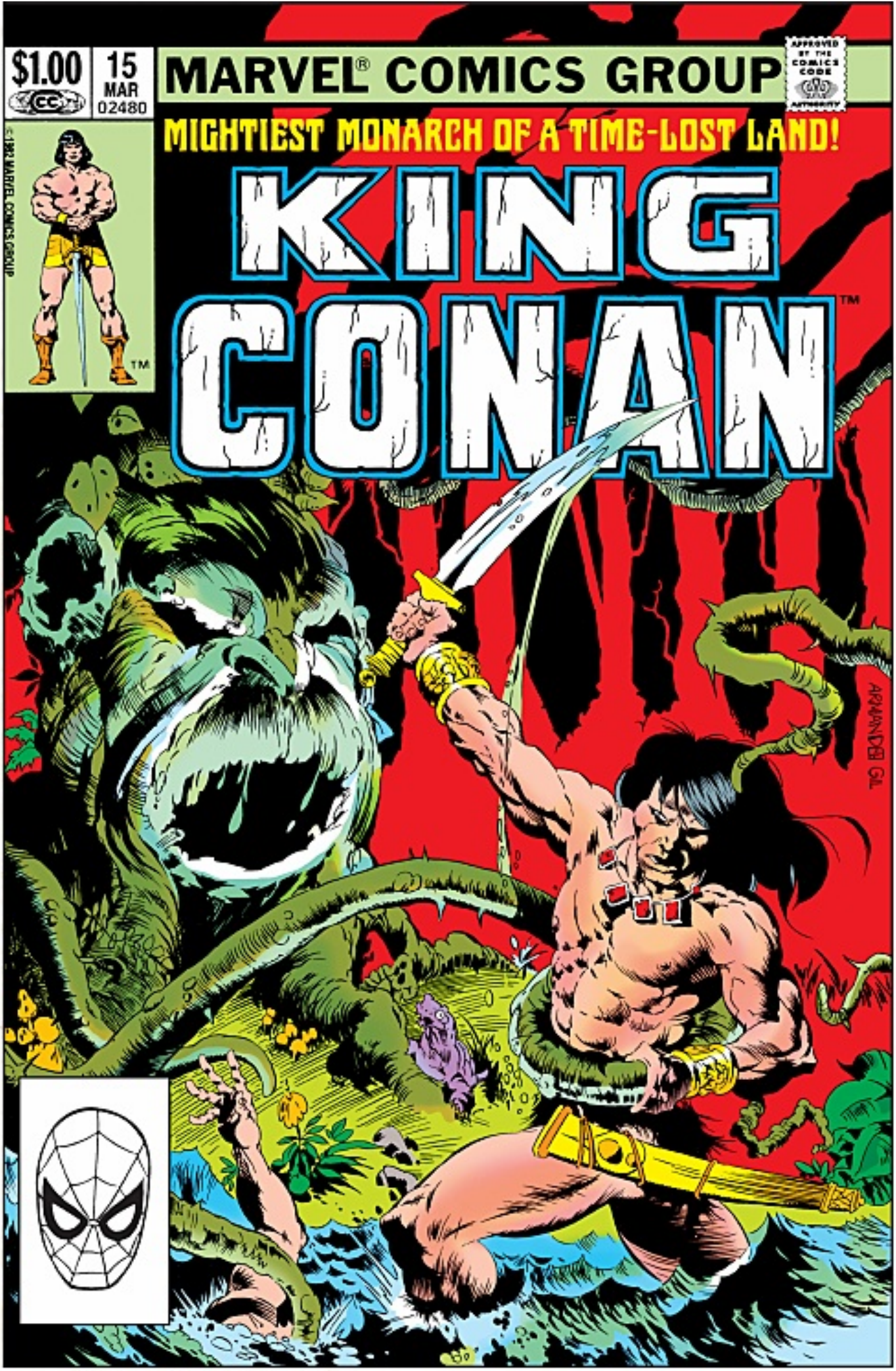
It was nice to see Doug Moench delving further into the characters and their personalities. That is one thing that gives KING CONAN that sort of magic that the early CONAN THE BARBARIAN had. Doug's handling of Alcemides this issue was great. The fact that Mimus's daughter was responsible for the release of the demon greatly added to the story. I'd like to see Zenobia and Conn explored more in future stories. Conn's barbaric arrogance is already beginning to flare up as shown on page 8. These tidbits of characterization really make me look forward to future issues. Keep this up!

As far as continued stories go, don't do anything longer than a two-parter. Remember, this is a bi-monthly, and one of the few Marvel mags that usually wraps up its stories in one issue. I don't think I could stand the sixty day wait between issues if an adventure should go beyond the regular thirty-eight pages.

As for the letter column, how about the following title suggestions: "Tomes to the King," "Missives to the Monarch," "Aquilonian Express," "Royal Scrolls," "Aquilonian Scrolls," "Tarantian Chronicles." Well, you get the idea.

KING CONAN has really become one of my favorite mags. Thanks.

Gordon Manley
P.O. Box 3041
Portsmouth, VA 23701



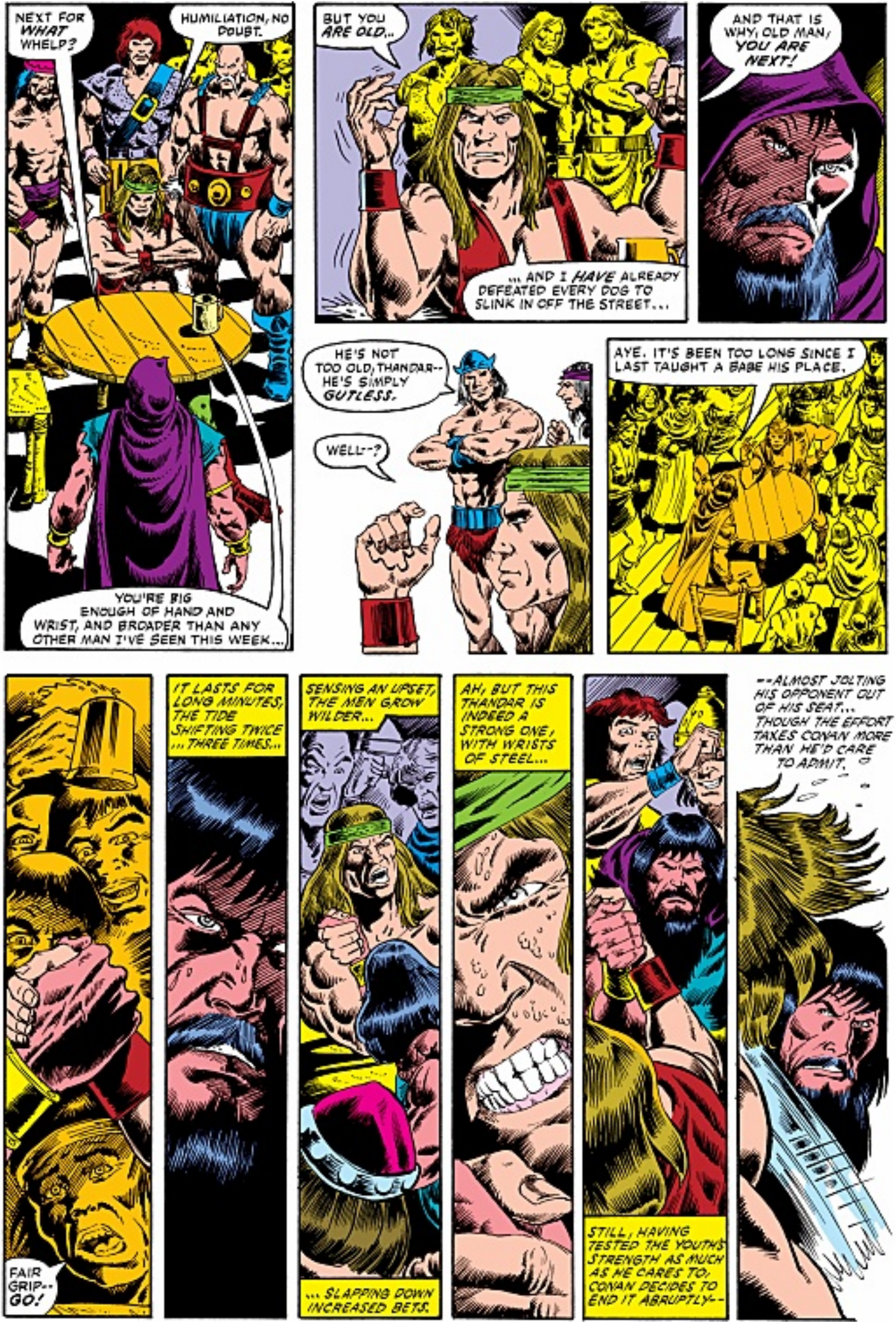
COVER PENCILER & INKER: ARMANDO GIL

Stan Lee PRESENTS: KING CONAN

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD

DOUG MOENCH, WRITER · MARC SILVESTRI, ARTIST · RICARDO VILLAMONTE & JON D'AGOSTINO, INKERS · MIKE HIGGINS, LETTERER · GEORGE ROUSSOS, COLORIST · DENNY O'NEIL, EDITOR · JIM SHOOTER, CHIEF

THE LOOTERS of R'SHANN


NEXT FOR WHAT WHELP?
HUMILIATION, NO DOUBT.
YOU'RE BIG ENOUGH OF HAND AND WRIST, AND BROADER THAN ANY OTHER MAN I'VE SEEN THIS WEEK...
BUT YOU ARE OLD...
... AND I HAVE ALREADY DEFEATED EVERY DOG TO SLINK IN OFF THE STREET...
AND THAT IS WHY, OLD MAN, YOU ARE NEXT!
HE'S NOT TOO OLD, THANDAR-- HE'S SIMPLY GUTLESS.
WELL--?
AYE. IT'S BEEN TOO LONG SINCE I LAST TAUGHT A BABE HIS PLACE.
FAIR GRIP-- GO!
IT LASTS FOR LONG MINUTES, THE TIDE SHIFTING TWICE ... THREE TIMES...
SENSING AN UPSET, THE MEN GROW WILDER...
... SLAPPING DOWN INCREASED BETS.
AH, BUT THIS THANDAR IS INDEED A STRONG ONE, WITH WRISTS OF STEEL...
STILL, HAVING TESTED THE YOUTH'S STRENGTH AS MUCH AS HE CARES TO, CONAN DECIDES TO END IT ABRUPTLY--
--ALMOST JOLTING HIS OPPONENT OUT OF HIS SEAT... THOUGH THE EFFORT TAXES CONAN MORE THAN HE'D CARE TO ADMIT.

HE DID IT! HE BEAT THANDAR!
NOT BAD FOR AN OLD MAN... BUT HAD I TAKEN YOU ON FIRST, RATHER THAN TENTH, I'D HAVE TWISTED YOU TO YOUR KNEES IN THE FLOOR-SPILL.
OH?

AND HAVE YOU CONTESTED TEN MEN WITH THE BLADE TONIGHT...
...OR WOULD I BE THE FIRST?
THE MEN DRAW BACK HASTILY, CLEARING ROOM.

THERE IS ONE WOMAN HOWEVER, WHO LEANS FORWARD MOST AVIDLY...

YOU'D BE THE FIRST, OLD MAN...

...BUT SINCE YOU BESTED ME FAIRLY...

...AND SINCE I SHOULD HAVE ADMITTED IT WITHOUT INSULT...

...BUY YOURSELF AN ALE INSTEAD.

WELL--?

CONAN TURNS AWAY, NEITHER ACCEPTING THE COIN--
--NOR PRESSING THE FIGHT.

LATER, AND FROM A TABLE AFAR, CONAN WATCHES THANDAR BOISTEROUSLY HOLD COURT.
WHAT WOULD THE YOUTH SAY, HE WONDERS, IF HE KNEW HE'D BEEN BESTED BY HIS KING?

A RUEFUL SMILE VISITS CONAN'S FACE, FOR HE IS MUCH REMINDED OF HIMSELF IN YOUNGER DAYS...
...ALTHOUGH HE NEVER WOULD HAVE BOUGHT HIS WAY OUT OF A FIGHT, AGAINST AN OLDER MAN OR NOT.
BESIDES, EVEN IF HE HAS LIVED LONG ENOUGH TO SEE THE WORLD AND MORE--

--HE'S HARDLY READY FOR A DEATH-BED...
I DON'T THINK YOU'RE TOO OLD-- NOT IN THE WAYS THAT COUNT.
AND MY NAME, BY THE WAY, IS BRISSA.

ACROSS THE ROOM, CONAN NOTES; THANDAR'S MOOD TURNS SWIFTLY SOUR-- THE GIRL IS PROBABLY HIS FAVORITE...

THEN GO FIND YOURSELF SOME OTHER PARTNER, BRISSA, WITH WHOM TO CONSPIRE YOUR DRAMA OF JEALOUSY.

I WAS WRONG, DOG...
MAYHAP YOU ARE TOO OLD.

EVEN AS THE TART DRIFTS AWAY, A NEW AND CONSPICUOUSLY FURTIVE FIGURE ENTERS THE SCENE-- AND, WITH A START OF AMUSEMENT, CONAN RECOGNIZES HIM AS PONTRERO, A WEALTHY AND WELL-KNOWN NOBLE OF THE COURT.
FALSE BEARDS, THEN, ARE THE FASHION THIS NIGHT... AND CONAN WONDERS IF HIS OWN LOOKS JUST AS LUDICROUS...

WHAT IS THIS? THE TART BRISSA--MAKING A BEELINE FOR PONTRERO, LEADING HIM UP THE STAIRS...
A PLANNED ASSIGNATION, THEN, AND FAR MORE THAN A SPONTANEOUS ACT TO DRAW JEALOUSY.

YET IN THE MIEN OF THE BRASH YOUNG THANDAR, WATCHING THEM DISAPPEAR AT THE CREST OF THE STAIRS, THERE SHOWS NO TRACE OF ANGER...

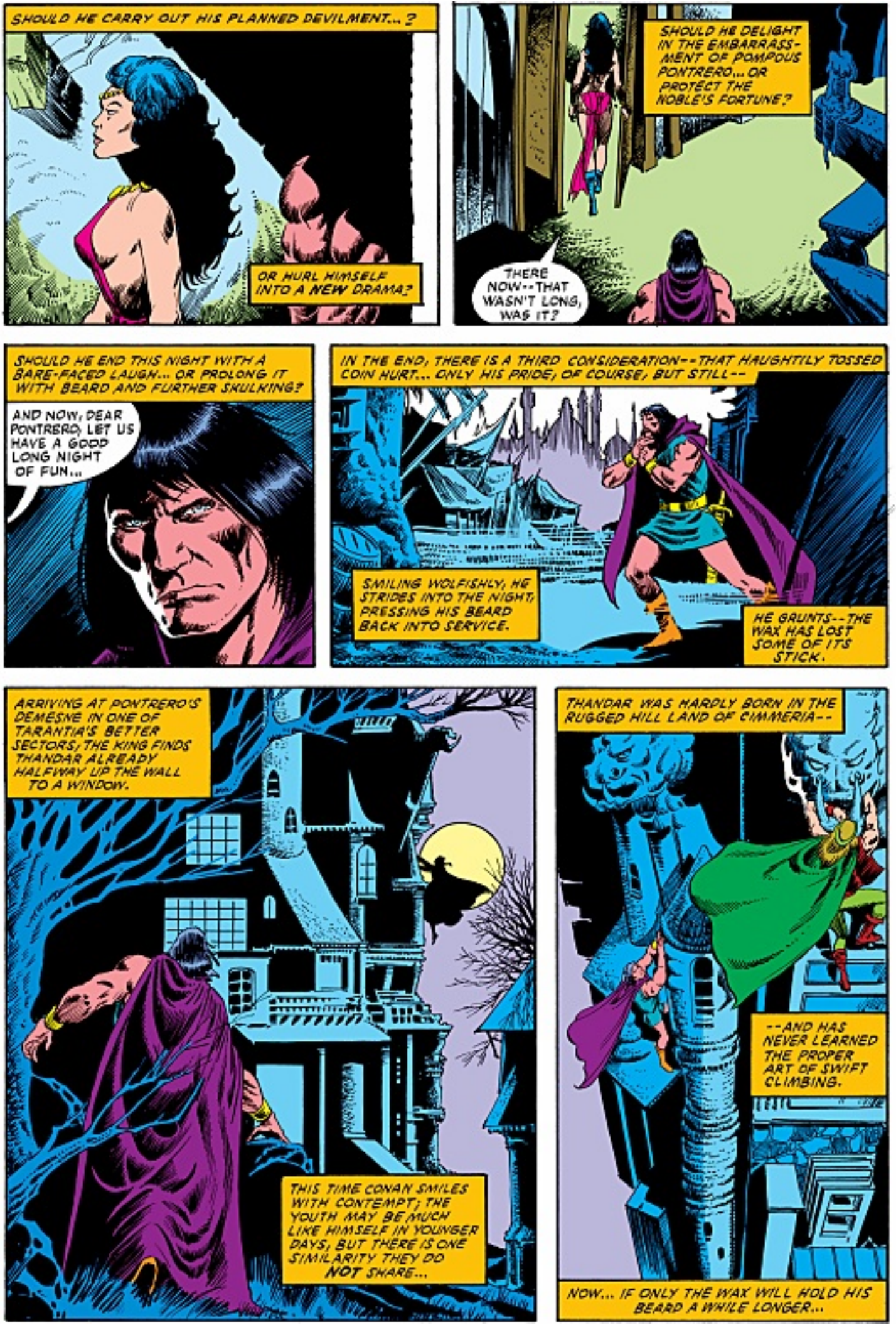
INSTEAD, QUICKLY BUT CALMLY GATHERING UP CLOAK AND SWORD, HE HEADS FOR THE DOOR AND THE NIGHT.
CONAN FROWNS OVER THE SMALL MYSTERY, THEN SHRUGS--MAYHAP HE WAS WRONG ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THANDAR AND BRISSA...

AND NOW A GRIN SPLITS HIS HORSEHAIR BEARD AS A BIT OF DEVILMENT COMES TO MIND...
AYE--IN COURT, PONTRERO HAS EVER PLAYED THE PROPER AND POMPOUS ASS, DISDAINING CONAN'S LACK OF CIVILIZED GRACE IN A BID TO ADVANCE HIS OWN POLITICAL AMBITIONS.

AND TO SURPRISE THE PRIG NOW, IN THE ARMS OF A CHEAP TAVERN WENCH...!

AYE--IT WILL MAKE A GOOD STORY, AT LEAST, TO TELL ZENOBIA AND TROCERO BACK AT THE PALACE...

BUT AS CONAN PEELS HIS FALSE BEARD-- BETTER TO CRASH IN AS THE OUTRAGED KING THAN AS A FELLOW SKULKER IN DISGUISE-- HE FREEZES...
...HEARING FOOTFALLS FROM BEHIND THE NEARER DOOR.
IT WILL BE BUT A MOMENT, MY LORD-- I MUST SIMPLY PREPARE FOR YOU, THAT IS ALL...
HE SLIDES BACK INTO SHADOW AS BRISSA EMERGES--AND HEADS FOR THE REAR EXIT.
EH--? WHAT MANNER OF "PREPARATION" IS THIS?
STEALTHILY, HE FOLLOWS HER...
TONIGHT IS THE NIGHT, THANDAR-- ALL IS CLEAR!
PONTRERO'S WIFE IS OFF VISITING HER SISTER AND HAS TAKEN MOST OF THE SERVANTS, LEAVING BUT A FEW BEHIND.
HAH! THEN SOON WE SHALL BASK IN THE GLINT OF GOLD, BRISSA...
CONAN'S EYES NARROW--HE WAS NOT MISTAKEN, THEN, ABOUT THEIR RELATIONSHIP...
FAREWELL, BRISSA...
WASTE NOT YOUR LIPS TOO MUCH ON THAT FAT FOOL!
BUT WHAT NOW--?


SHOULD HE CARRY OUT HIS PLANNED DEVILMENT...?
OR HURL HIMSELF INTO A NEW DRAMA?
SHOULD HE DELIGHT IN THE EMBARRASSMENT OF POMPOUS PONTRERO... OR PROTECT THE NOBLE'S FORTUNE?
THERE NOW--THAT WASN'T LONG, WAS IT?
SHOULD HE END THIS NIGHT WITH A BARE-FACED LAUGH... OR PROLONG IT WITH BEARD AND FURTHER SKULKING?
AND NOW, DEAR PONTRERO, LET US HAVE A GOOD LONG NIGHT OF FUN...
IN THE END, THERE IS A THIRD CONSIDERATION--THAT HAUGHTILY TOSSED COIN HURT... ONLY HIS PRIDE, OF COURSE, BUT STILL--
SMILING WOLFISHLY, HE STRIDES INTO THE NIGHT, PRESSING HIS BEARD BACK INTO SERVICE.
HE GRUNTS--THE WAX HAS LOST SOME OF ITS STICK.
ARRIVING AT PONTRERO'S DEMESNE IN ONE OF TARANTIA'S BETTER SECTORS, THE KING FINDS THANDAR ALREADY HALFWAY UP THE WALL TO A WINDOW.
THIS TIME CONAN SMILES WITH CONTEMPT; THE YOUTH MAY BE MUCH LIKE HIMSELF IN YOUNGER DAYS, BUT THERE IS ONE SIMILARITY THEY DO NOT SHARE...
THANDAR WAS HARDLY BORN IN THE RUGGED HILL LAND OF CIMMERIA--
--AND HAS NEVER LEARNED THE PROPER ART OF SWIFT CLIMBING.
NOW... IF ONLY THE WAX WILL HOLD HIS BEARD A WHILE LONGER...

AFTER MUCH LABORIOUS EFFORT, THANDAR FINALLY CLAMBERS THROUGH AN OPEN WINDOW.
HE GIVES HIS EYES A MOMENT IN THE DEEPER GLOOM, THEN CREEPS TOWARD THE ALLURING CASK ON THE TABLE--JUST WHERE BRISSA SAID IT WOULD BE.
BUT WHEN HIS TREMBLING HANDS REACH OUT FOR IT...
EH--?!
THAT'S FAR ENOUGH, THIEF!
WHO--?!
LET'S JUST SAY I'M THE GUARDIAN OF THE KINGDOM'S TREASURES, WHELP.
YOU AGAIN! YOU FOLLOWED ME--DETERMINED TO SEE HOW YOU'D FARE IN A FIGHT!
BUT LISTEN TO ME, OLD MAN--THIS IS NO TIME TO CHASE YOUR LOST YOUTH! THERE IS MORE AT STAKE HERE THAN YOU CAN DREAM!
YOU'D BE SURPRISED, BOY, BY WHAT I'VE DREAMT.
OMPH!
LOOK--YOU BEAT ME FAIRLY AT ARM-STRENGTH. I ADMIT IT.
AND WERE YOU YOUNGER MAYHAP YOU'D EVEN BEAT ME IN A FIGHT.
NOW, ARE YOU SATISFIED?
NO, BECAUSE I AM NOT YOUNGER.
ALL RIGHT! YOU'D DEFEAT ME EVEN NOW--EVEN AT YOUR AGE! NOW LEAVE--LET ME FINISH MY WORK!
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, THIEF, BUT THEN, YOUTH SELDOM DOES.
IT'S NOT MY AGE I WISH TO HALT-- IT'S YOU AND YOUR "WORK."

VERY WELL, OLD MAN-- THEN I MUST KILL YOU!
MUST TRY TO KILL ME, WHELP.

HAH!

THE TWO ENDEAVORS, YOU'LL SOON SEE--

--ARE HARDLY THE SAME!

NEVERTHELESS, THE DISGUISED KING IS HONESTLY IMPRESSED BY THANDAR'S SWORD PROWESS.
EVEN LACKING THE LONG YEARS NECESSARY TO FULLY HONE ONE'S SKILL, THIS YOUTH IS UNNERVINGLY GOOD...

...POSSESSING IN FULL MEASURE ALL THE NATURAL TRAITS VITAL TO SUCCESSFUL SLAYING--DARTING SPEED, RECKLESS AGGRESSION, TIRELESS STRENGTH, AND NOT ENOUGH FEAR TO COVER A DWARF'S SHAME.
AYE, THE MORE CONAN SEES OF THIS UPSTART THANDAR, THE MORE HE IS STRUCK BY THE UNCANNY SIMILARITY TO HIS OWN YOUNGER SELF.

FINALLY THEY GRAPPLE--

--AND WHEN THANDAR'S ROUGH HAND GOUGES CONAN'S FACE...
EH--? A FALSE BEARD--?!

MITRA! YOU... YOU'RE THE KING!
YOU'RE CONAN--KING OF AQUILONIA!
BUT THANDAR'S INCREDULITY DIES ABORNING...

...AND EXPLODES INTO UNBRIDLED MIRTH.
HA
HA HA HA HA

WHAT'S SO FUNNY WHELP?

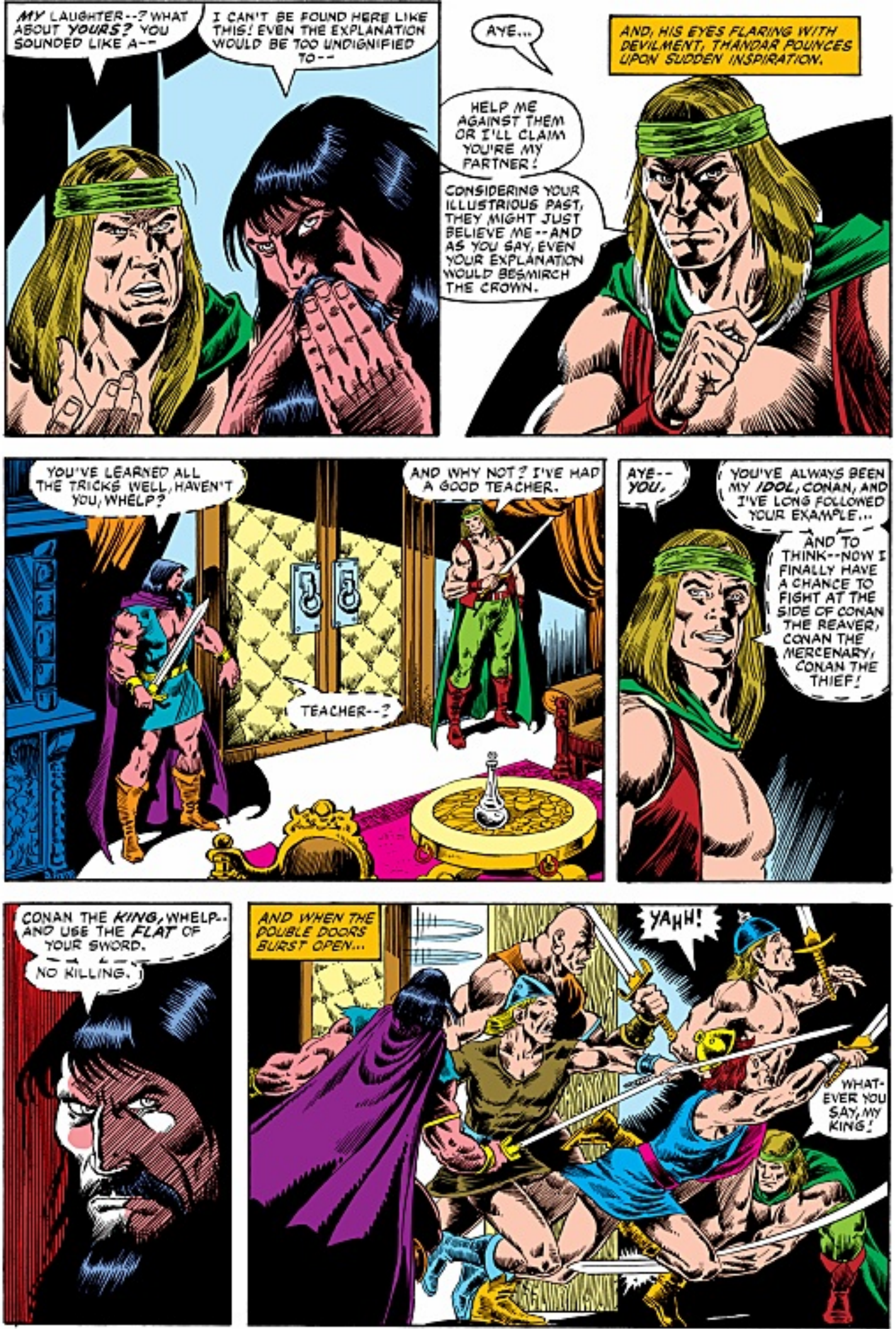
YOU! CURSING ME FOR A THIEF--WHEN YOU WERE PERHAPS THE GREATEST THIEF WHO EVER SLIPPED THROUGH SHADOW!

THE CUTPURSES OF THE BACK ALLEYS STILL WHISPER YOUR NAME IN REVERENCE--
--POINTING TO THE SPIRES OF THE VERY PALACE AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE HEIGHTS TO WHICH A THIEF MAY ASPIRE!

WHY, YOU... YOU EVEN FINANCED YOUR TAKEOVER OF THE CROWN BY LOOTING THE TREASURE OF TRANICOS!
YOU... HAVE A POINT, THIEF...
AND, DESPITE HIMSELF, CONAN SMILES...

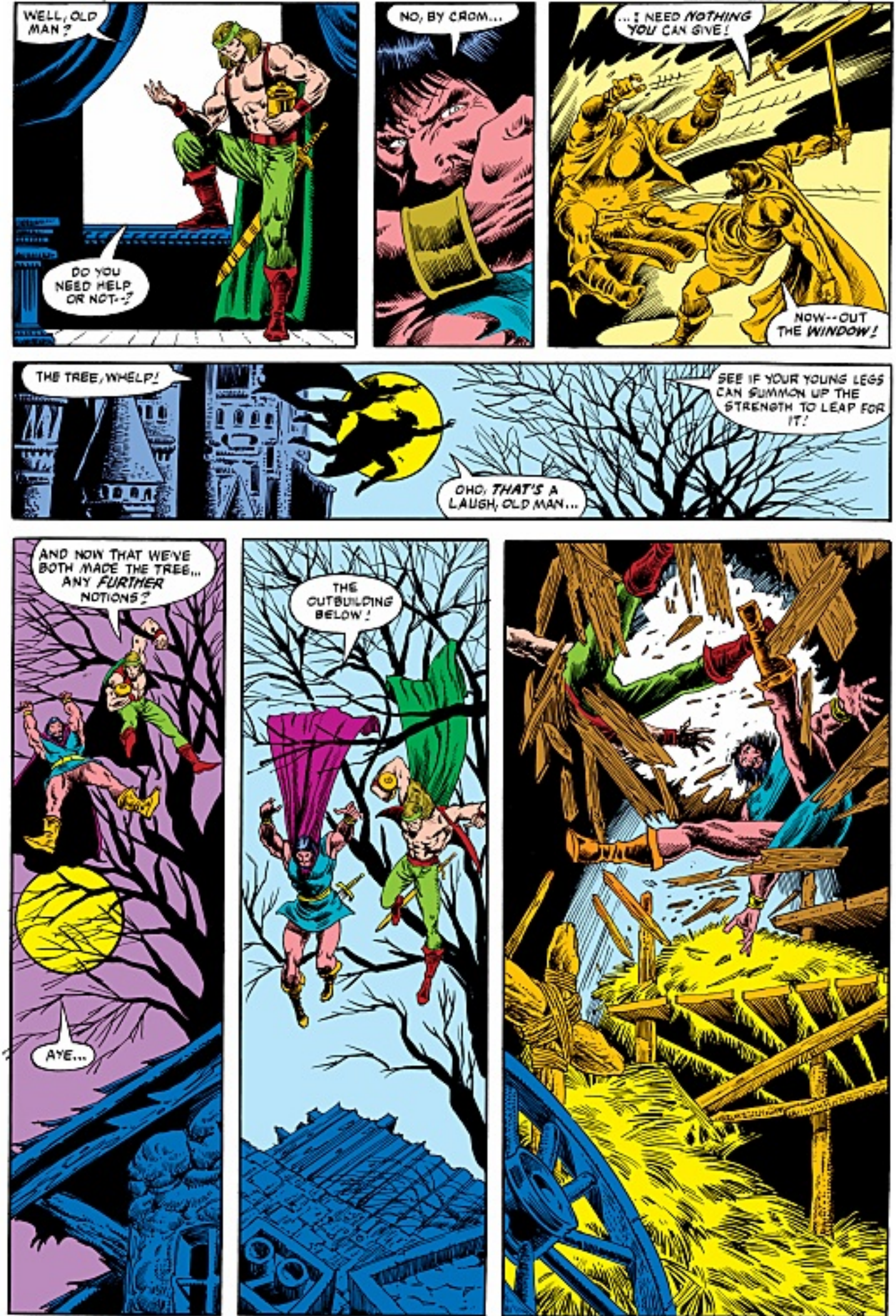
...THEN GUFFAWS WITH EVEN MORE ZEST THAN THANDAR CAN SUMMON.
HA HA HA HA HA

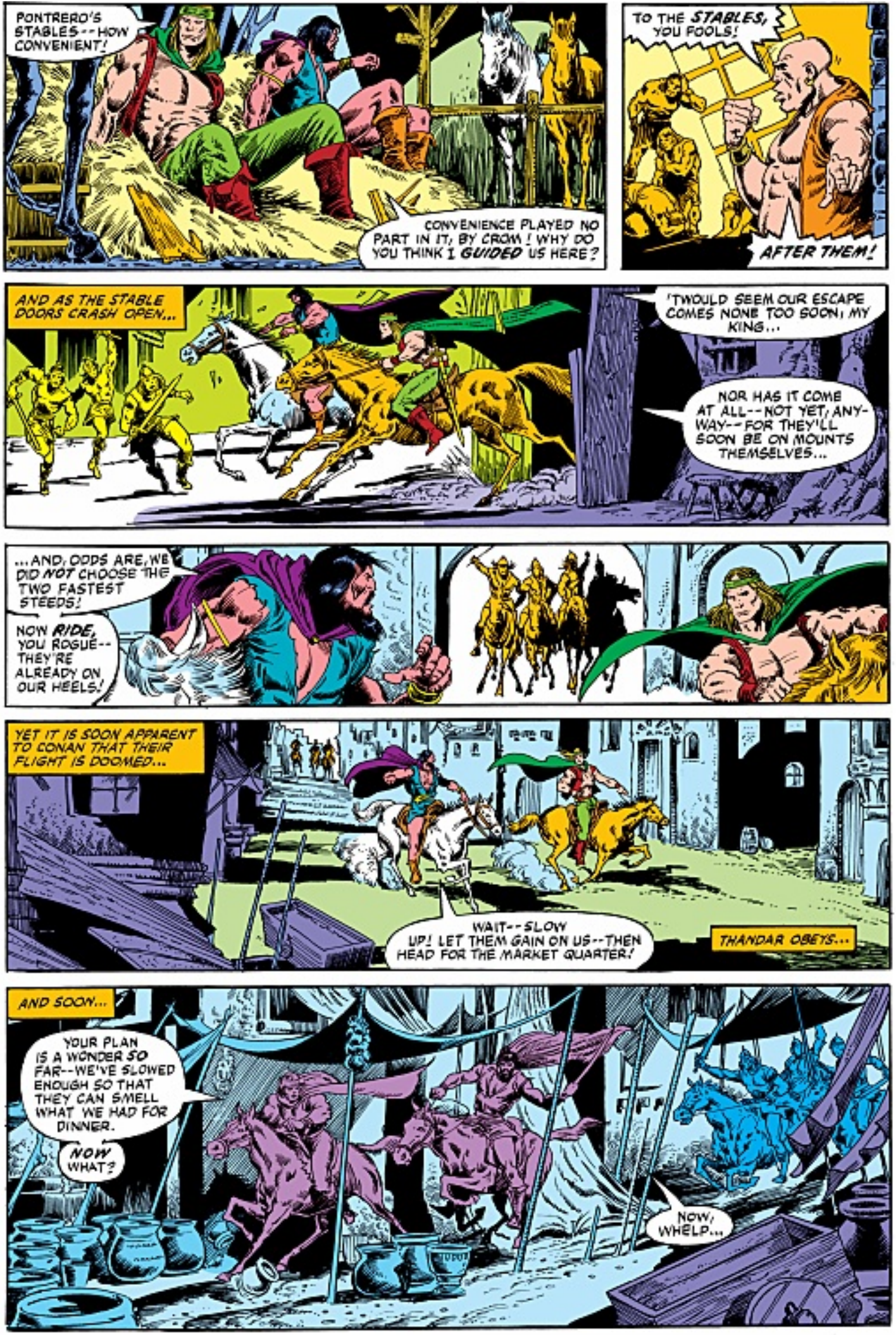
WAIT! WHAT'S THAT?
THE SERVANTS! YOUR CURSED GIGGLING HAS ROUSED THEM, YOU WET-NOSED FOOL!
BTUMP


MY LAUGHTER--? WHAT ABOUT YOURS? YOU SOUNDED LIKE A--
I CAN'T BE FOUND HERE LIKE THIS! EVEN THE EXPLANATION WOULD BE TOO UNDIGNIFIED TO--
AYE...
HELP ME AGAINST THEM OR I'LL CLAIM YOU'RE MY PARTNER!
CONSIDERING YOUR ILLUSTRIOUS PAST, THEY MIGHT JUST BELIEVE ME--AND AS YOU SAY, EVEN YOUR EXPLANATION WOULD BESMIRCH THE CROWN.
AND, HIS EYES FLARING WITH DEVILMENT, THANDAR POUNCES UPON SUDDEN INSPIRATION.
YOU'VE LEARNED ALL THE TRICKS WELL, HAVEN'T YOU, WHELP?
AND WHY NOT? I'VE HAD A GOOD TEACHER.
TEACHER--?
AYE--YOU.
YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN MY IDOL, CONAN, AND I'VE LONG FOLLOWED YOUR EXAMPLE...
AND TO THINK--NOW I FINALLY HAVE A CHANCE TO FIGHT AT THE SIDE OF CONAN THE REAVER, CONAN THE MERCENARY, CONAN THE THIEF!
CONAN THE KING, WHELP--AND USE THE FLAT OF YOUR SWORD.
NO KILLING.
AND WHEN THE DOUBLE DOORS BURST OPEN...
YAHH!
WHATEVER YOU SAY, MY KING!

"KING"--?!
JUST A JOKE, FRIEND.
A MERE JEST,
A JEST, EH?
WELL, BEARDED ONE... I'M NOT LAUGHING.
I SUPPOSE NOT...
... BUT THEN, NEITHER IS YOUR FRIEND HERE.
GRRR
MAYHAP HE MADE A MISTAKE?
QUIT TALKING, MY KING, AND START FIGHTING! THE BIG BALD ONE IS YOURS--I'LL TAKE THE ONE WITH THE HELMET!
YOU'LL TAKE ME, ALL RIGHT, BRAGGART! BUT YOU'LL ALSO TAKE THE POINT OF MY--

...MY...
...SWORD...
NOW! DON'T JUST STAND THERE GRINNING!
OUT THE WINDOW WHILE YOU CAN, FOOL!
ARE YOU NOT FORGETTING SOMETHING, MY PARTNER IN CRIME?
OUT THE WINDOW INDEED...
...BUT NOT WITHOUT TAKING WHAT WE CAME FOR.
AND NOW THAT WE HAVE THE ORNATE CASK IN QUESTION...
...ANY TIME YOU'RE READY, MY FELLOW THIEF.
OR DO YOUR OLD BONES REQUIRE SOME AID AGAINST THAT HAIRLESS APE?
MURRRGHH--!


WELL, OLD MAN?
DO YOU NEED HELP OR NOT--?
NO, BY CROM...
...I NEED NOTHING YOU CAN GIVE!
NOW--OUT THE WINDOW!
THE TREE, WHELP!
SEE IF YOUR YOUNG LEGS CAN SUMMON UP THE STRENGTH TO LEAP FOR IT!
OHO, THAT'S A LAUGH, OLD MAN...
AND NOW THAT WE'VE BOTH MADE THE TREE... ANY FURTHER NOTIONS?
AYE...
THE OUTBUILDING BELOW!


PONTRERO'S STABLES--HOW CONVENIENT!
CONVENIENCE PLAYED NO PART IN IT, BY CROM! WHY DO YOU THINK I GUIDED US HERE?
TO THE STABLES, YOU FOOLS!
AFTER THEM!
AND AS THE STABLE DOORS CRASH OPEN...
'TWOULD SEEM OUR ESCAPE COMES NONE TOO SOON, MY KING...
NOR HAS IT COME AT ALL--NOT YET, ANYWAY--FOR THEY'LL SOON BE ON MOUNTS THEMSELVES...
...AND, ODDS ARE, WE DID NOT CHOOSE THE TWO FASTEST STEEDS!
NOW RIDE, YOU ROGUE--THEY'RE ALREADY ON OUR HEELS!
YET IT IS SOON APPARENT TO CONAN THAT THEIR FLIGHT IS DOOMED...
WAIT--SLOW UP! LET THEM GAIN ON US--THEN HEAD FOR THE MARKET QUARTER!
THANDAR OBEYS...
AND SOON...
YOUR PLAN IS A WONDER SO FAR--WE'VE SLOWED ENOUGH SO THAT THEY CAN SMELL WHAT WE HAD FOR DINNER.
NOW WHAT?
NOW, WHELP...

...THE CHASE...

... ENDS!
YAHH!

KEEP GOING! RIDE FOR THE HILLS BEYOND THE CITY!

DO YOU THINK IT WAS CONVINCING ENOUGH?
AYE... AND MADE ALL THE MORE SO BY THE FACT THERE WERE TWO OF THEM.
BUT WHO, I WONDER, WAS THE OTHER ONE?

IN THE WOODED HILLS A SAFE DISTANCE BEYOND TARANTIA...
I KNEW THERE WAS GOOD REASON TO CHOOSE YOU AS MY IDOL, CONAN.
AYE--IT WAS GOOD SPORT, I'LL GIVE IT THAT--ESPECIALLY FOR A NIGHT I FIGURED TO HOLD NO MORE THAN THE ENJOYMENT OF A FEW ALES.
EVEN SO, IT FEELS SO GOOD TO BE RID OF THAT CURSED BEARD.

NOW LET'S HAVE A LOOK AT YOUR TREASURE...
THE CASK? OH, BUT IT'S NOT TREASURE, CONAN.
EH--? THEN WHAT--?

SEED CONES--?!
SEED CONES--?!
AYE--FROM THE JUBLA TREE--AND THEY ARE THE MEANS TO A TREASURE.

OF COURSE THEY ARE. WHAT ELSE WOULD THEY BE?
JEST IF YOU LIKE... BUT KNOW YOU OF THE HIDDEN ONES?
AYE--I'VE EVEN MET SOME OF THEM.

IT'S THE OLDEST CULT OF THEM ALL--THE USERS OF THE FLAME KNIFE.
MEN OF MANY LANDS AND ALL RACES BELONGED TO THE CULT OF THE HIDDEN ONES--IT LIES BEHIND THE WORSHIP OF MITRA, ISHTAR, AND ASURA.
IT DOES--?
AYE, THE HIDDEN ONES SWAYED THE DESTINIES OF EMPIRES...
...NOT BY LEADING ARMIES INTO THE FIELD, BUT BY POISON AND FIRE AND THE FLAME-BLADED DAGGER THAT BIT IN THE DARK.

YOU ARE RICH IN EXPERIENCE, CONAN--I SEE I HAVE MUCH CATCHING UP TO DO IF EVER I HOPE TO RIVAL YOUR EXAMPLE.
ANYWAY, TWO DAYS EAST OF HERE IT IS SAID THERE LIE RUINS ONCE BELONGING TO THE CULT--THE TEMPLE OF R'SHANN...

...AND THE RUINS OF THIS TEMPLE, IT IS FURTHER SAID, STILL HOARD A FABULOUS TREASURE.
NOT LOOTED AFTER ALL THESE CENTURIES?
CROM'S HELL, BOY, YOU BELIEVE SUCH AN ADDLED LEGEND?

THE RUINS ARE HAUNTED BY SUPERNATURAL FORCES GUARDING THE TREASURE--AND SMALL WONDER THEY'VE YET TO BE PLUNDERED! BUT THE SMOKE OF THESE SEED CONES CONTROLS THOSE FORCES--PUTS THEM TO REST!
IN THE MORNING I SET OUT FOR THE RUINS--TO BURN THESE CONES AND CLAIM THE TREASURE!

AND DESPITE HIMSELF, CONAN IS SLIGHTLY AWED...
YOU BELIEVE THIS TO BE TRUE--ABOUT THE SUPERNATURAL FORCES--
--AND YOU PLAN TO DEFY THEM?

OF COURSE--WITH THESE CONES. HOW ELSE COULD I CLAIM THE TREASURE?
AND WHY NOT JOIN ME, CONAN? WE COULD SHARE THE LOOT...
I'D EVEN GIVE YOU A THIRD.

NO... I COULDN'T DO SUCH A THING.
WHY NOT? YOU'VE DONE THINGS FAR MORE DARING IN THE PAST.
BUT I'M THE KING NOW.

AYE... BUT, TOO, I THINK YOU ARE STILL CONAN,
GOOD NIGHT.
AND KING SIMPLY STARES AT YOUTH...

MUCH LIKE HIMSELF THIS THANDAR MAY BE, BUT THERE IS ONE CRUCIAL WAY IN WHICH THEIR NATURES PART. CONAN WOULD NEVER SAY SO ALOUD, BUT ANY-ONE WHO WILLINGLY SEEKS OUT THE SUPERNATURAL IS MORE THAN COURAGEOUS...
...HE IS A FOOL.

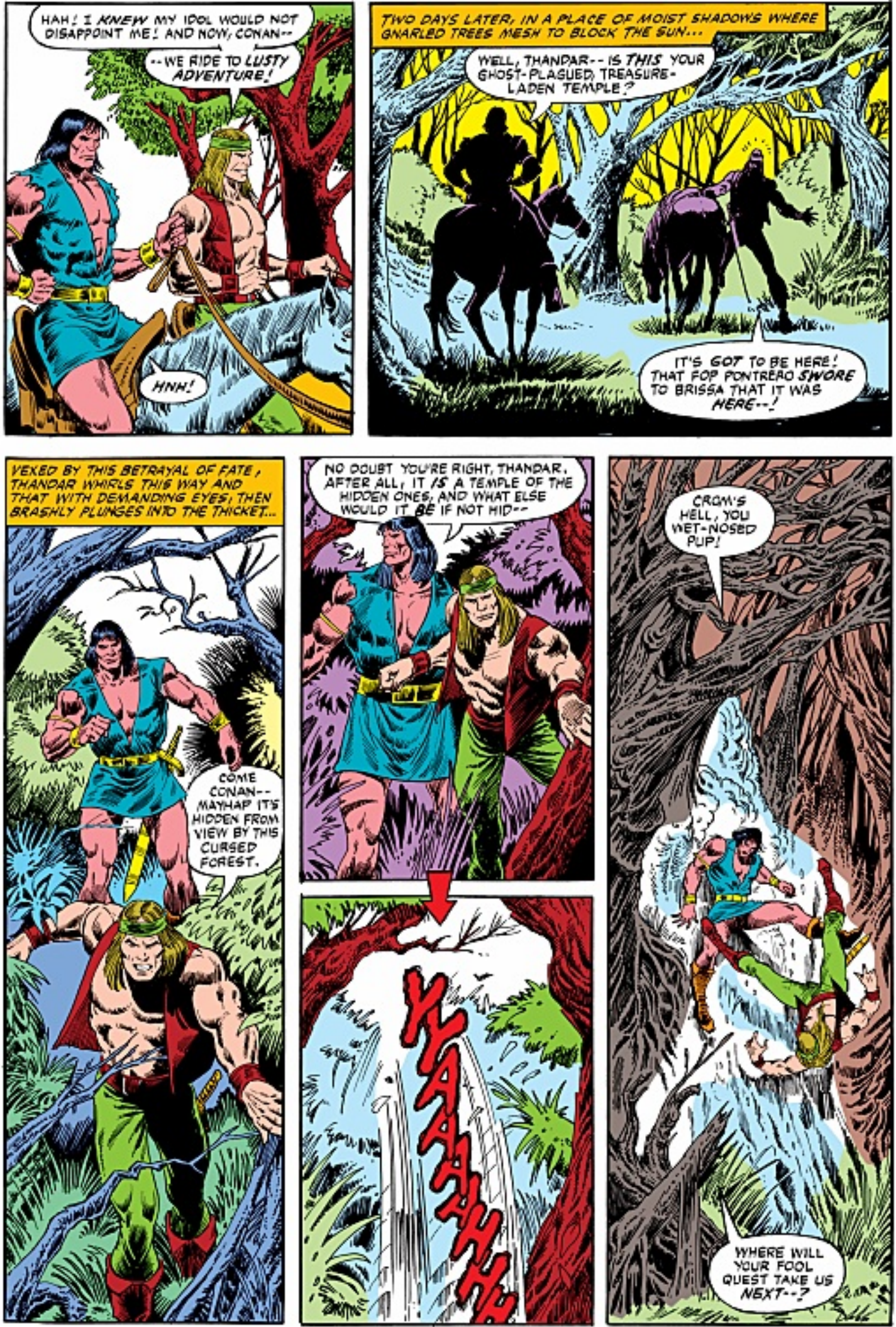
AND SO THE KING SLUMPS BACK ON HIS BLANKET TO SLEEP, THOUGH HIS EYES REMAIN OPEN...
...STARING LONG AND HARD AT THE FIERCE GLITTER OF A TREASURE HELD BY DISTANT STARS.

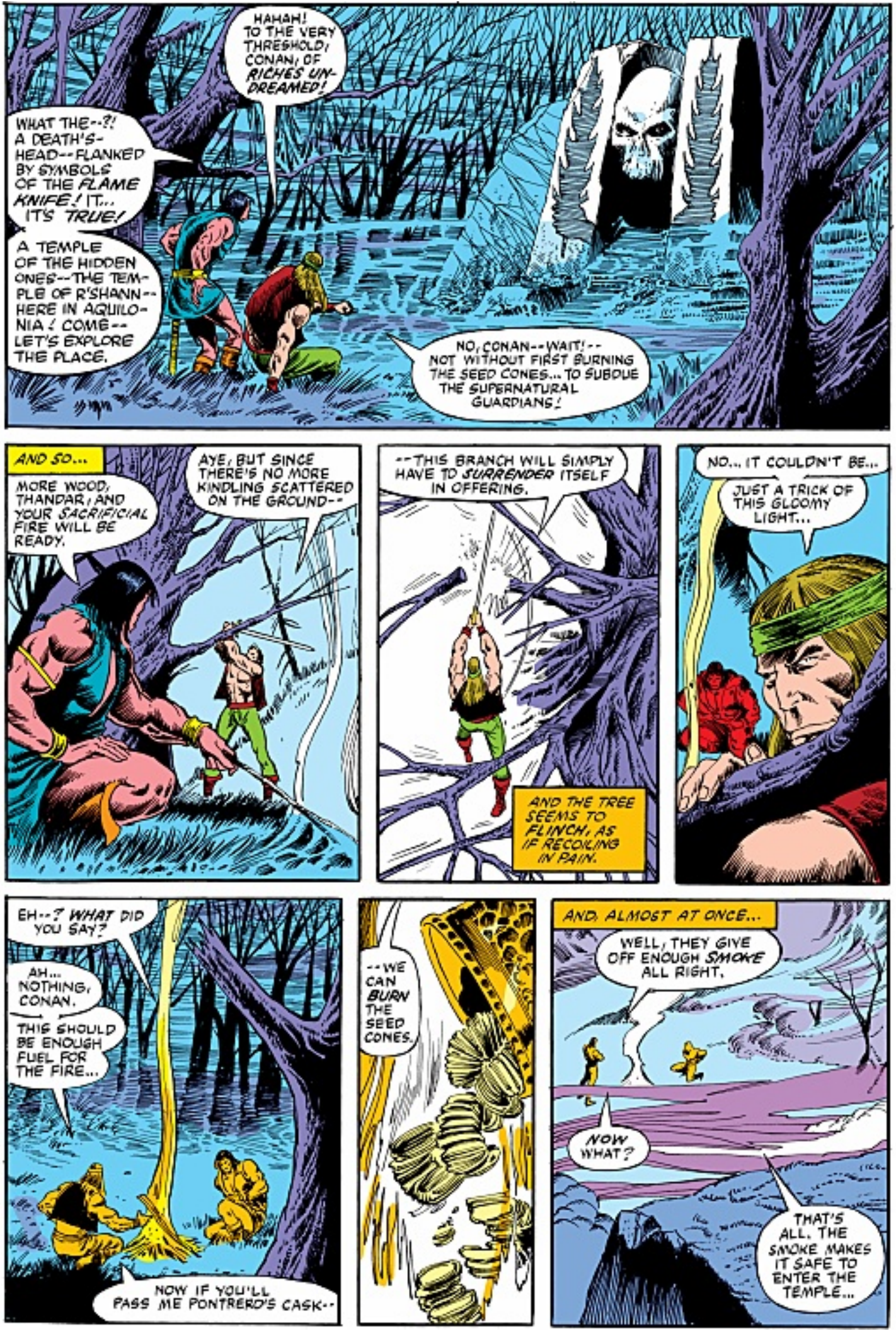
MORNING...
ARE YOU COMING, CONAN-- OR HAS THE CROWN OF A KING BOUND YOUR HEAD WITH FEAR OF GHOSTS AND DEMONS?

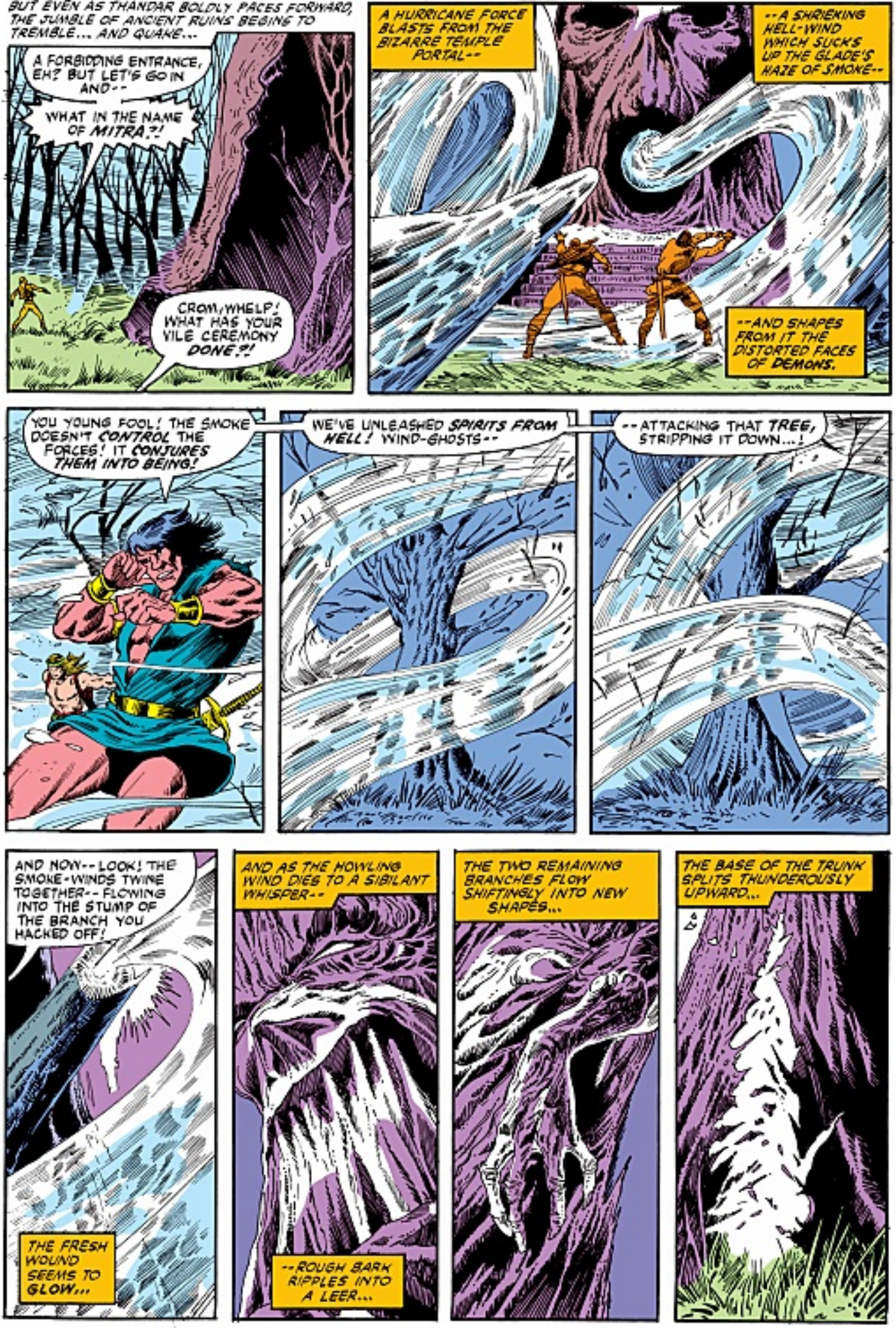
CONAN LOOKS BACK IN THE DIRECTION OF TARANTIA, WHERE AWAIT HIS QUEEN ZENOBIA AND HIS SON CONN...

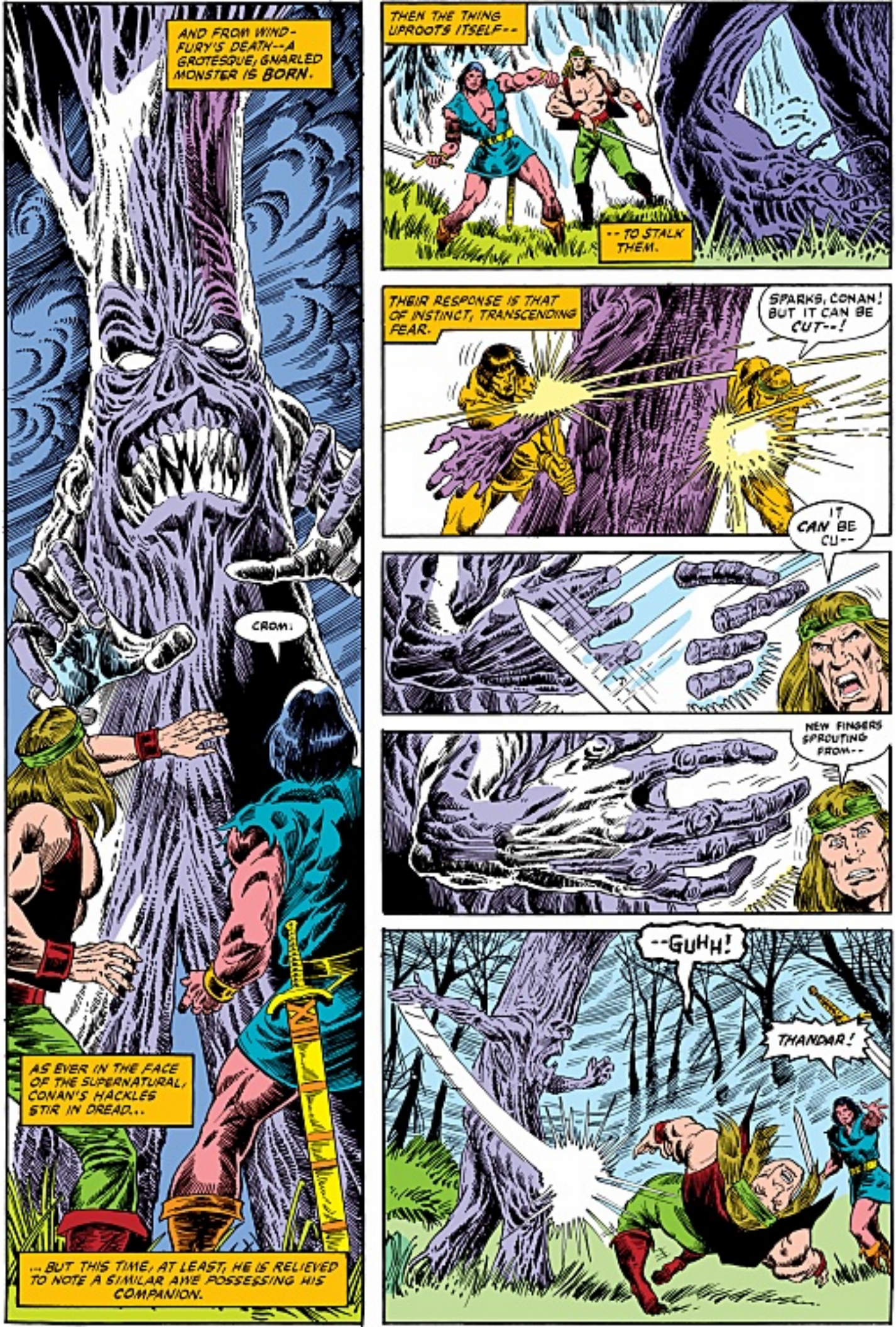
AND WHERE, TOO, AWAIT ALL THE DULL AND TEDIOUS CHORES OF A SEDATE KINGDOM'S MONARCH...

WHY NOT? IF A RAW YOUTH LIKE THANDAR CAN DARE THE DARK FORCES OF SOME PRIMORDIAL SHADOW-HAUNTED TOMB...
...THEN HE, CERTAINLY, CAN DO NO LESS.
WAIT UP, WHELP-- AND DON'T BE IN SUCH A HURRY TO FEED YOUR BLOOD TO DEMONS.

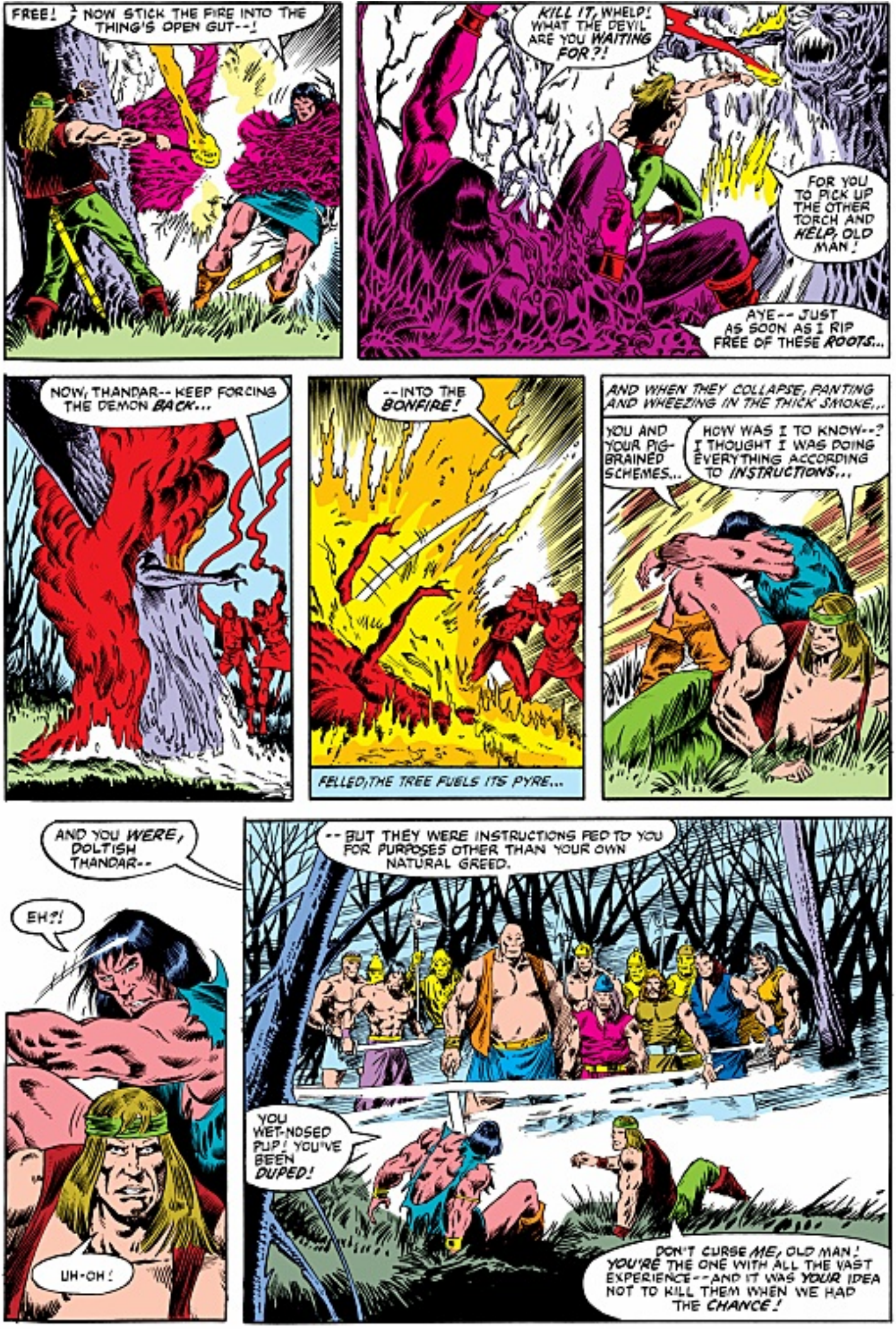

HAH! I KNEW MY IDOL WOULD NOT DISAPPOINT ME! AND NOW, CONAN--
--WE RIDE TO LUSTY ADVENTURE!
HNH!
TWO DAYS LATER, IN A PLACE OF MOIST SHADOWS WHERE GNARLED TREES MESH TO BLOCK THE SUN...
WELL, THANDAR--IS THIS YOUR GHOST-PLAGUED, TREASURE-LADEN TEMPLE?
IT'S GOT TO BE HERE! THAT FOP PONTREAO SWORE TO BRISSA THAT IT WAS HERE--!
VEXED BY THIS BETRAYAL OF FATE, THANDAR WHIRLS THIS WAY AND THAT WITH DEMANDING EYES; THEN BRASHLY PLUNGES INTO THE THICKET...
COME CONAN--MAYHAP IT'S HIDDEN FROM VIEW BY THIS CURSED FOREST.
NO DOUBT YOU'RE RIGHT, THANDAR. AFTER ALL, IT IS A TEMPLE OF THE HIDDEN ONES, AND WHAT ELSE WOULD IT BE IF NOT HID--
YYAAAAHH
CROM'S HELL, YOU WET-NOSED PUP!
WHERE WILL YOUR FOOL QUEST TAKE US NEXT--?


HAHAH! TO THE VERY THRESHOLD, CONAN, OF RICHES UNDREAMED!
WHAT THE--?! A DEATH'S-HEAD--FLANKED BY SYMBOLS OF THE FLAME KNIFE! IT... IT'S TRUE!
A TEMPLE OF THE HIDDEN ONES--THE TEMPLE OF R'SHANN--HERE IN AQUILONIA! COME--LET'S EXPLORE THE PLACE.
NO, CONAN--WAIT!--NOT WITHOUT FIRST BURNING THE SEED CONES... TO SUBDUE THE SUPERNATURAL GUARDIANS!
AND SO...
MORE WOOD, THANDAR, AND YOUR SACRIFICIAL FIRE WILL BE READY.
AYE, BUT SINCE THERE'S NO MORE KINDLING SCATTERED ON THE GROUND--
--THIS BRANCH WILL SIMPLY HAVE TO SURRENDER ITSELF IN OFFERING.
AND THE TREE SEEMS TO FLINCH, AS IF RECOILING IN PAIN.
NO... IT COULDN'T BE...
JUST A TRICK OF THIS GLOOMY LIGHT...
EH--? WHAT DID YOU SAY?
AH... NOTHING, CONAN.
THIS SHOULD BE ENOUGH FUEL FOR THE FIRE...
NOW IF YOU'LL PASS ME PONTRERO'S CASK--
--WE CAN BURN THE SEED CONES.
AND, ALMOST AT ONCE...
WELL, THEY GIVE OFF ENOUGH SMOKE ALL RIGHT.
NOW WHAT?
THAT'S ALL. THE SMOKE MAKES IT SAFE TO ENTER THE TEMPLE...


BUT EVEN AS THANDAR BOLDLY PACES FORWARD, THE JUMBLE OF ANCIENT RUINS BEGINS TO TREMBLE... AND QUAKE...
A FORBIDDING ENTRANCE, EH? BUT LET'S GO IN AND--
WHAT IN THE NAME OF MITRA?!
CROM, WHELP! WHAT HAS YOUR VILE CEREMONY DONE?!
A HURRICANE FORCE BLASTS FROM THE BIZARRE TEMPLE PORTAL--
--A SHRIEKING HELL-WIND WHICH SUCKS UP THE GLADE'S HAZE OF SMOKE--
--AND SHAPES FROM IT THE DISTORTED FACES OF DEMONS.
YOU YOUNG FOOL! THE SMOKE DOESN'T CONTROL THE FORCES! IT CONJURES THEM INTO BEING!
WE'VE UNLEASHED SPIRITS FROM HELL! WIND-GHOSTS--
--ATTACKING THAT TREE, STRIPPING IT DOWN...!
AND NOW--LOOK! THE SMOKE-WINDS TWINE TOGETHER--FLOWING INTO THE STUMP OF THE BRANCH YOU HACKED OFF!
THE FRESH WOUND SEEMS TO GLOW...
AND AS THE HOWLING WIND DIES TO A SIBILANT WHISPER--
--ROUGH BARK RIPPLES INTO A LEER...
THE TWO REMAINING BRANCHES FLOW SHIFTINGLY INTO NEW SHAPES...
THE BASE OF THE TRUNK SPLITS THUNDEROUSLY UPWARD...


AND FROM WIND-FURY'S DEATH--A GROTESQUE, GNARLED MONSTER IS BORN.
CROM!
AS EVER IN THE FACE OF THE SUPERNATURAL, CONAN'S HACKLES STIR IN DREAD...
...BUT THIS TIME, AT LEAST, HE IS RELIEVED TO NOTE A SIMILAR AWE POSSESSING HIS COMPANION.
THEN THE THING UPROOTS ITSELF--
--TO STALK THEM.
THEIR RESPONSE IS THAT OF INSTINCT, TRANSCENDING FEAR.
SPARKS, CONAN! BUT IT CAN BE CUT--!
IT CAN BE CU--
NEW FINGERS SPROUTING FROM--
--GUHH!
THANDAR!

NOW CONAN STANDS ALONE AGAINST THE ARBOREAL DEMON.
FEAR POUNDS THROUGH HIS VEINS.
BUT SINCE FLIGHT IS UNTHINKABLE, HE SUMMONS HIS EVERY LAST RESERVE OF STRENGTH--
--AND ATTACKS THE THING.
ITS CHEST SPLITS OPEN, RIPELY...
...GUSHING FORTH A WET SPILL OF TENDRILS, STICKY WITH BLOOD-SAP.
GROPING, THE ROOT-MASS SEEKS AND CLUTCHES HIM, SNARES HIM, DRAGS HIM BACK TOWARD THE GAPING, OOZING RENT IN ITS TRUNK...
CONAN--!
IN THE NAME OF BLESSED MITRA, WHAT CAN--
THE FIRE, THANDAR! BURN THE THING!
BURN IT-- BEFORE IT SQUEEZES THE LIFE OUT OF ME!
SHAKING OFF HIS PAIN, THANDAR SNATCHES UP TWO FIREBRANDS...
HE CASTS ONE AT THE CREATURE'S BASE...
...THEN, WHEN IT SPASMS AND TWISTS IN GROANING PAIN--
--HE JAMS THE OTHER TORCH INTO THE MESH OF TENDRILS BINDING HIS IDOL.


FREE! NOW STICK THE FIRE INTO THE THING'S OPEN GUT--!
KILL IT, WHELP! WHAT THE DEVIL ARE YOU WAITING FOR?!
FOR YOU TO PICK UP THE OTHER TORCH AND HELP, OLD MAN!
AYE-- JUST AS SOON AS I RIP FREE OF THESE ROOTS...
NOW, THANDAR-- KEEP FORCING THE DEMON BACK...
--INTO THE BONFIRE!
FELLED, THE TREE FUELS ITS PYRE...
AND WHEN THEY COLLAPSE, PANTING AND WHEEZING IN THE THICK SMOKE...
YOU AND YOUR PIG-BRAINED SCHEMES...
HOW WAS I TO KNOW--? I THOUGHT I WAS DOING EVERYTHING ACCORDING TO INSTRUCTIONS...
AND YOU WERE, DOLTISH THANDAR--
EH?!
UH-OH!
--BUT THEY WERE INSTRUCTIONS FED TO YOU FOR PURPOSES OTHER THAN YOUR OWN NATURAL GREED.
YOU WET-NOSED PUP! YOU'VE BEEN DUPED!
DON'T CURSE ME, OLD MAN! YOU'RE THE ONE WITH ALL THE VAST EXPERIENCE--AND IT WAS YOUR IDEA NOT TO KILL THEM WHEN WE HAD THE CHANCE!

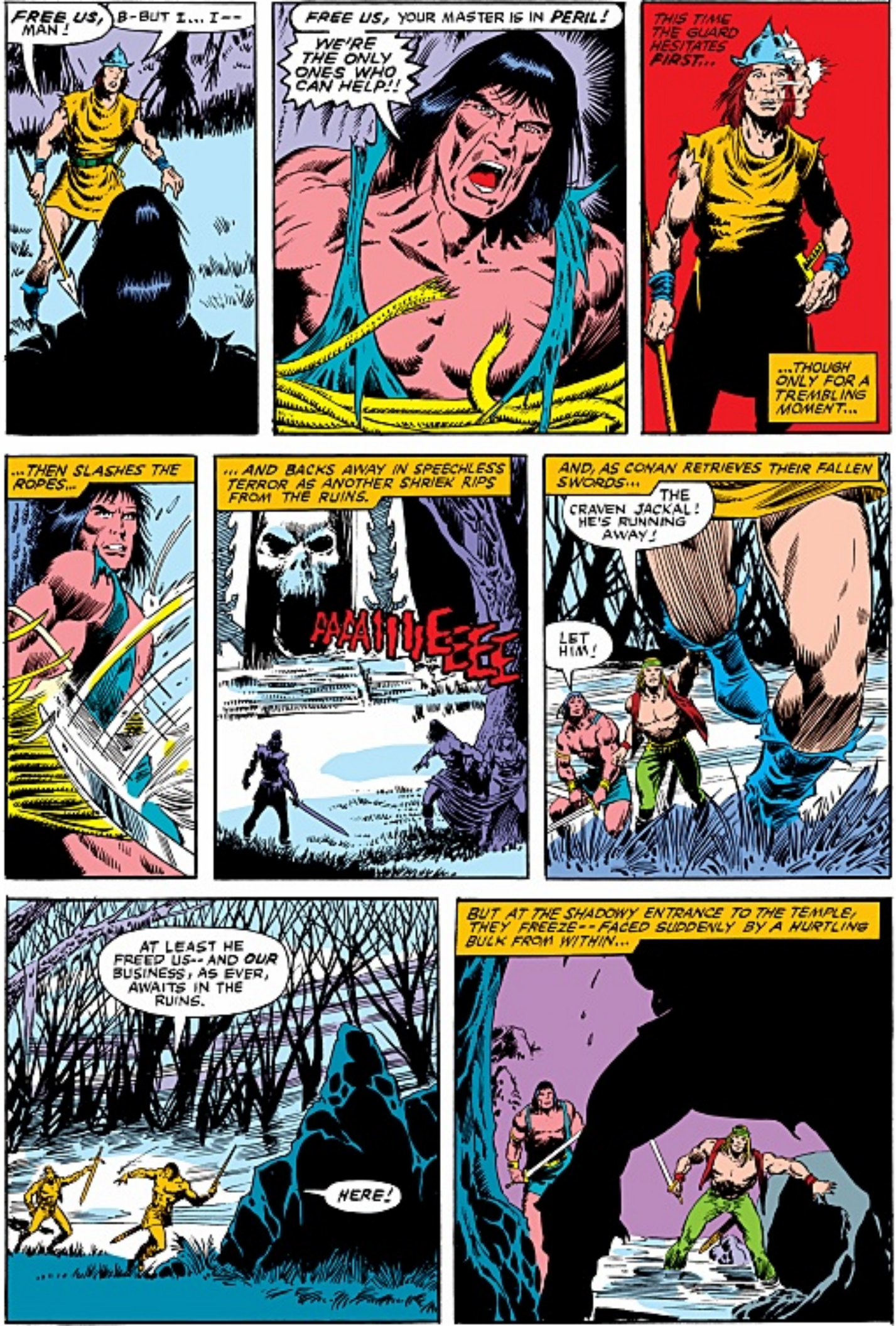
POOR THANDAR--
YOU ALWAYS WERE
TOO EASILY LED...
BRISSA--AND
PONTRERO!
THEN YOU WERE PLAYING
ME FOR A FOOL ALL ALONG--
TO GET ME TO SLAY THE
TREE DEMON FOR YOU...
OF COURSE, DEAR THANDAR--
CLEARING A PATH TO THE
TREASURE FOR US.

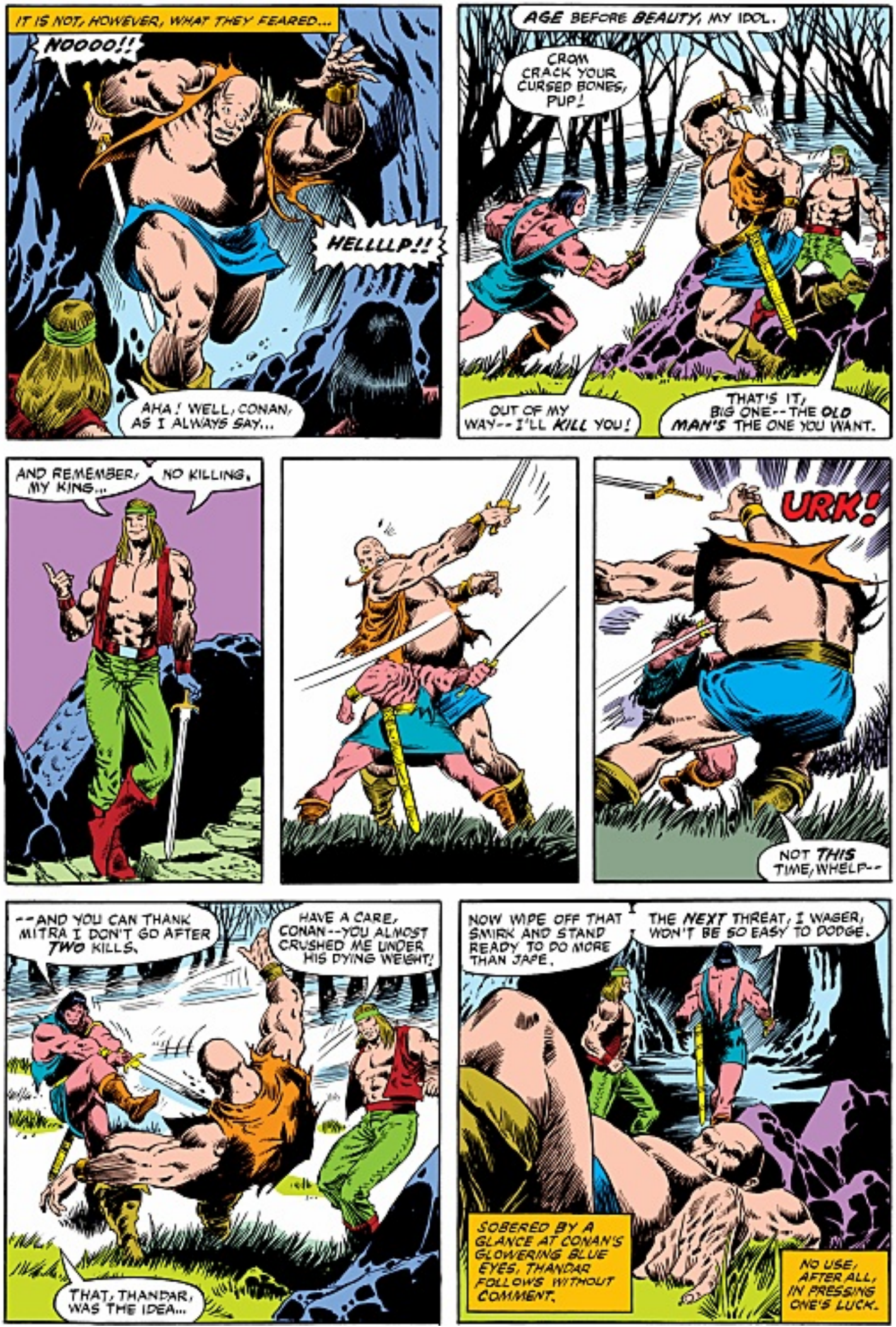
CURSE ME
FOR AN
ADDLE-PATED,
LOVESICK
CLOWN!
AYE--BUT SAY ONE
WORD ABOUT FOLLOW-
ING MY EXAMPLE AND
I'LL GUT YOU FROM
BELLY TO THROAT.
EH--? THAT VOICE! CONAN--?
IS THAT YOU IN ALL THE
SMOKE--THE KING?!
AYE, PONTRERO, IT'S ME--
AND THIS CHARADE HAS
GONE ON LONG ENOUGH.
AS YOUR KING,
I DEMAND AN
END TO IT.

HMMM...
AH... I'M AFRAID NOT,
CONAN. INDEED, I THINK
THE DRAMA SHOULD UN-
FOLD A TRIFLE FURTHER...
MAYHAP EVEN TO A
SURPRISE CLIMAX.
YOU OAFISH
FOP! WHAT
DO YOU
MEAN BY--
I MEAN, BARBARIAN, THAT I
CAN HARDLY PERMIT YOUR
RETURN TO COURT WITH THE
NEWS THAT I HAVE BECOME A
COMMON LOOTER OF ANCIENT
TEMPLES--
--A MANIPULATOR
OF THIEVES--
A LOVER OF LOWLY
SERVING WENCHES...

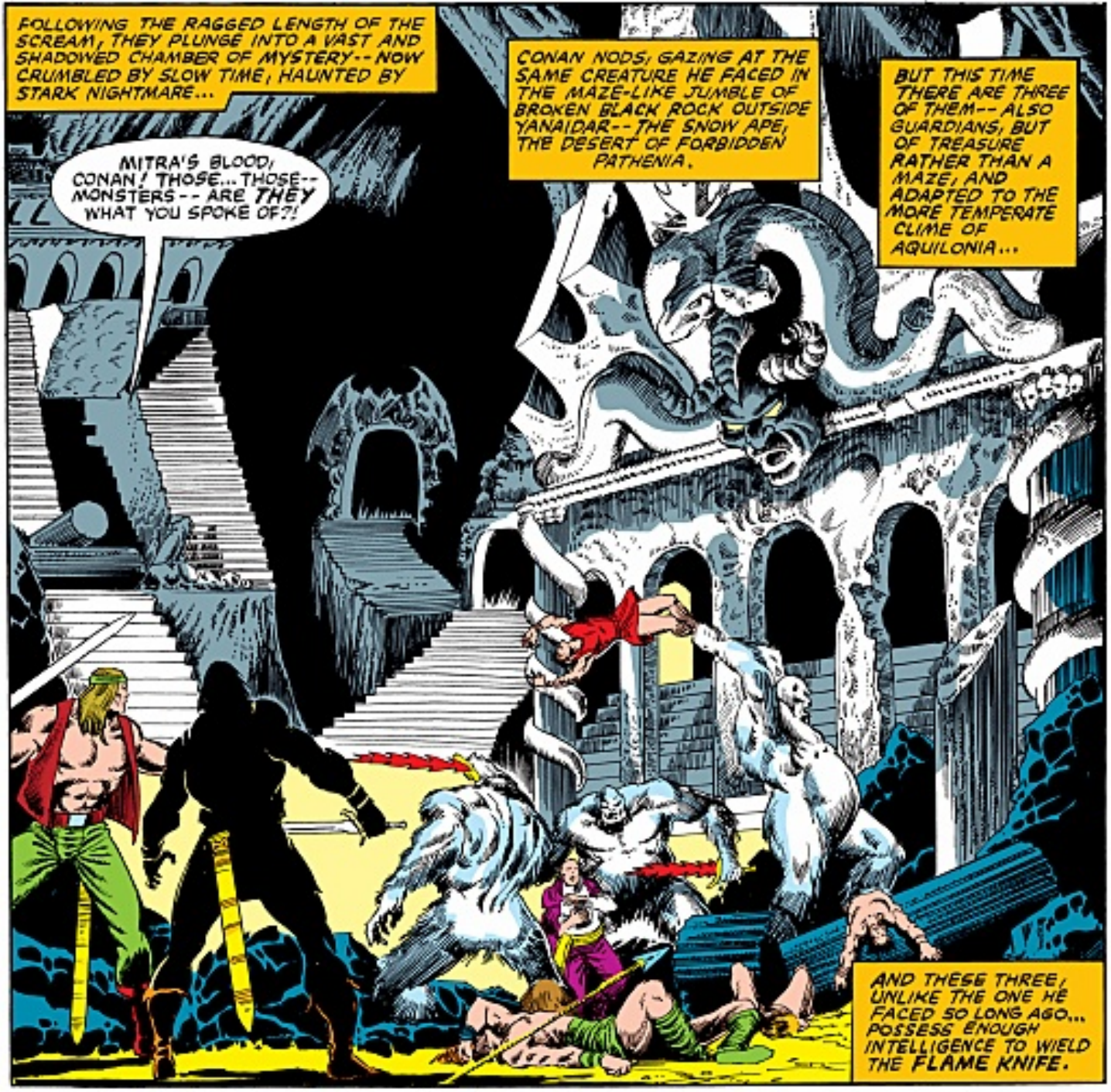
I WARN YOU, PONTRERO--THE JEST HAS GONE ON TOO LONG...
NOT FOR HE WHO WILL CLAIM THE LAST LAUGH, CONAN. YOU SEE, I MAY NEVER FIND ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY SUCH AS THIS... AND IT OCCURS TO ME THAT AQUILONIA MAY BE BETTER SERVED WITHOUT A BARBARIAN KING...
SMIRKING, PONTRERO PEELS AWAY HIS OWN DISGUISE...
AS FOR YOUR SUCCESSOR, SEE YOU NOW A LIKELY CANDIDATE ANYWHERE IN THIS ANCIENT GLADE?
SEIZE HIM--BIND HIM TO A TREE--AND THE THIEF AS WELL!
I SHALL DECIDE HOW BEST TO DISPOSE OF HIM AFTER I'VE SEEN THE TREASURE.
TREACHEROUS DOG! I'LL--
SILENCE, BARBARIAN--LEST I ADD AGONY TO YOUR INDIGNITY.
AND NOW, WHILE MY DECISION WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY BE DEATH FOR YOU, CONAN, I MUST ADMIT THAT DISCREDITING YOU AS A COMMON THIEVING SAVAGE BEFORE ALL THE EYES OF THE COURT WOULD BE FAR MORE SATISFYING...
...AND I MAY YET CONCEIVE A WAY TO IMPLICATE YOU IN ALL THIS BUSINESS OF LOOTING...
...SAY, BY HAVING YOU CAUGHT WITH SOME OF THE STOLEN TREASURE--PROVIDED, OF COURSE, THERE IS ENOUGH TO SPARE.
AND WHEN PONTRERO AND HIS PARTY HAVE DISAPPEARED INTO THE RUINS...
THAT WITCH! SHE BETRAYED ME--FOR... FOR SOME YELLOW-EYED, WEAK-KNEED NOBLE!
NAY--FOR THE RICHES, THANDAR.
AND I GUESS SHE'S NO MORE GUILTY THAN YOU...
...OR AM I WRONG IN THINKING YOU USED HER LOVE AS A MEANS TO THE TREASURE?

NEVER MIND THAT! A COMMON TAVERN WENCH-- SHE'S HARDLY A GREAT LOSS! IT'S THAT LOOT I WANT!
TRY THINKING OF YOUR YOUNG LIFE, FIRST-- FOR EXAMPLE, HOW ARE YOU GOING TO GET US FREE?
ME--?! YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S CUT A BLOODY SWATH ACROSS THE ENTIRE HYBORIAN CONTINENT!
YOU'RE THE ONE WHO SLASHED THE CROWN RIGHT OFF THE TYRANT NUMENIDES' VERY HEAD--AND SEIZED HIS KINGDOM FOR YOUR OWN!
SURELY MERE ROPES CANNOT STIFLE YOUR OVERWHELMING LEGEND!
YOU'RE RIGHT, THANDAR. I AM, AFTER ALL, "MONARCH OF MIGHTY AQUILONIA!"...
GUARD! AS YOUR KING, I COMMAND YOU TO CUT US FREE AT ONCE!
THE NERVOUS LACKEY TAKES A HASTY, INVOLUNTARY STEP FORWARD, AS IF TO OBEY...
...THEN REMEMBERS HIMSELF, AND STAMMERS IN ABJECT APOLOGY...
I...F-FORGIVE ME, MY KING, BUT I... THEY WOULD SLAY ME... AND BEFORE THAT, TORTURE ME...
AYE, NO DOUBT THEY WOULD.
WELL... I TRIED.
YOU TRIED?! IF THAT'S THE BEST YOU CAN DO, OLD MAN, I'D RATHER BE A THIEF THAN A KI--
CROM AND MITRA!
AAAAIIIEEEEEE


FREE US, MAN!
B-BUT I... I--
FREE US, YOUR MASTER IS IN PERIL!
WE'RE THE ONLY ONES WHO CAN HELP!!
THIS TIME THE GUARD HESITATES FIRST...
...THOUGH ONLY FOR A TREMBLING MOMENT...
...THEN SLASHES THE ROPES...
...AND BACKS AWAY IN SPEECHLESS TERROR AS ANOTHER SHRIEK RIPS FROM THE RUINS.
AAAIIIEEEE
AND, AS CONAN RETRIEVES THEIR FALLEN SWORDS...
THE CRAVEN JACKAL! HE'S RUNNING AWAY!
LET HIM!
AT LEAST HE FREED US--AND OUR BUSINESS, AS EVER, AWAITS IN THE RUINS.
HERE!
BUT AT THE SHADOWY ENTRANCE TO THE TEMPLE, THEY FREEZE--FACED SUDDENLY BY A HURTLING BULK FROM WITHIN...


IT IS NOT, HOWEVER, WHAT THEY FEARED...
NOOOO!!
HELLLLP!!
AHA! WELL, CONAN, AS I ALWAYS SAY...
AGE BEFORE BEAUTY, MY IDOL.
CROM CRACK YOUR CURSED BONES, PUP!
OUT OF MY WAY--I'LL KILL YOU!
THAT'S IT, BIG ONE--THE OLD MAN'S THE ONE YOU WANT.
AND REMEMBER, MY KING... NO KILLING.
URK!
NOT THIS TIME, WHELP--
--AND YOU CAN THANK MITRA I DON'T GO AFTER TWO KILLS.
HAVE A CARE, CONAN--YOU ALMOST CRUSHED ME UNDER HIS DYING WEIGHT!
THAT, THANDAR, WAS THE IDEA...
NOW WIPE OFF THAT SMIRK AND STAND READY TO DO MORE THAN JAPE.
THE NEXT THREAT, I WAGER, WON'T BE SO EASY TO DODGE.
SOBERED BY A GLANCE AT CONAN'S GLOWERING BLUE EYES, THANDAR FOLLOWS WITHOUT COMMENT.
NO USE, AFTER ALL, IN PRESSING ONE'S LUCK.

TORCHES--AT LEAST PONTRERO AND HIS MEN HAVE ALREADY LIT THE WAY. BUT TELL ME, CONAN...
HAVE YOU E'ER SEEN THE LIKES OF THESE RUINS?
AYE--THEY'RE MUCH LIKE A REBUILT CITY I ONCE VISITED...
...WHEN I COMMANDED A BAND OF KOZAKI MERCENARIES FROM THE TURAN STEPPES.
A "REBUILT" CITY?
AYE, REBUILT BY A DOG NAMED VIRATA, MAGUS OF THE HIDDEN ONES--THE ASSASSIN CULT OF OF YEZM.
THE ORIGINAL CITY WAS CALLED YANAIDAR, BUILT IN THE ILBERS MOUNTAINS OF KUSHAF THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO BY THE GHOUL-KING URA.
AND, BY CROM, GHOULS STILL HAUNTED THE PLACE.
TRULY, YOU HAVE SEEN AND DONE MUCH, CONAN. IS IT GHOULS THEN DO YOU THINK, WHICH STILL INFEST THIS PLACE?
I SEE NOT HOW OR WHY...
...BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE IN YANAIDAR WHICH COULD ACCOUNT FOR THOSE SCREAMS WE HEARD, AND--
TURNING THE CORNER, CONAN ABRUPTLY HALTS, HIS EYES DARKENING.
AYE... IT'S AS I FEARED.
COME. LOOK.
BRISSA! BUT HER BACK--TWISTED, BROKEN--AND HER SKULL, CONAN! WHAT COULD WREAK SUCH CARNAGE--?
THE HAUNTER OF THE MAZE...
MY OLD FRIEND BALASH, THE KUSHAFI CHIEFTAN, CALLED IT A DEMON, AND WELL IT MAY BE... BUT TOO, IT CAN BE SLAIN LIKE ANY OTHER MAN OR BEAST.
I PROVED THAT. YET THE GIRL'S BEEN STABBED, AS WELL--AND THAT'S SOMETHING NEW.
COME, AND WE SHALL SEE IF I'M RIGHT, OR--
YYYAAAAAAA


FOLLOWING THE RAGGED LENGTH OF THE SCREAM, THEY PLUNGE INTO A VAST AND SHADOWED CHAMBER OF MYSTERY--NOW CRUMBLED BY SLOW TIME, HAUNTED BY STARK NIGHTMARE...
MITRA'S BLOOD, CONAN! THOSE...THOSE--MONSTERS--ARE THEY WHAT YOU SPOKE OF?!
CONAN NODS, GAZING AT THE SAME CREATURE HE FACED IN THE MAZE-LIKE JUMBLE OF BROKEN BLACK ROCK OUTSIDE YANAIDAR--THE SNOW APE, THE DESERT OF FORBIDDEN PATHENIA.
BUT THIS TIME THERE ARE THREE OF THEM--ALSO GUARDIANS, BUT OF TREASURE RATHER THAN A MAZE, AND ADAPTED TO THE MORE TEMPERATE CLIME OF AQUILONIA...
AND THESE THREE, UNLIKE THE ONE HE FACED SO LONG AGO... POSSESS ENOUGH INTELLIGENCE TO WIELD THE FLAME KNIFE.

PONTRERO ALONE STANDS STILL ALIVE IN THEIR MIDST, DESPERATELY CLUTCHING A SMALL CASK TO HIS CHEST...

THE REAL TREASURE, NO DOUBT.
BUT EVEN IF THE OBESE NOBLE SCARCELY DESERVES TO LIVE--

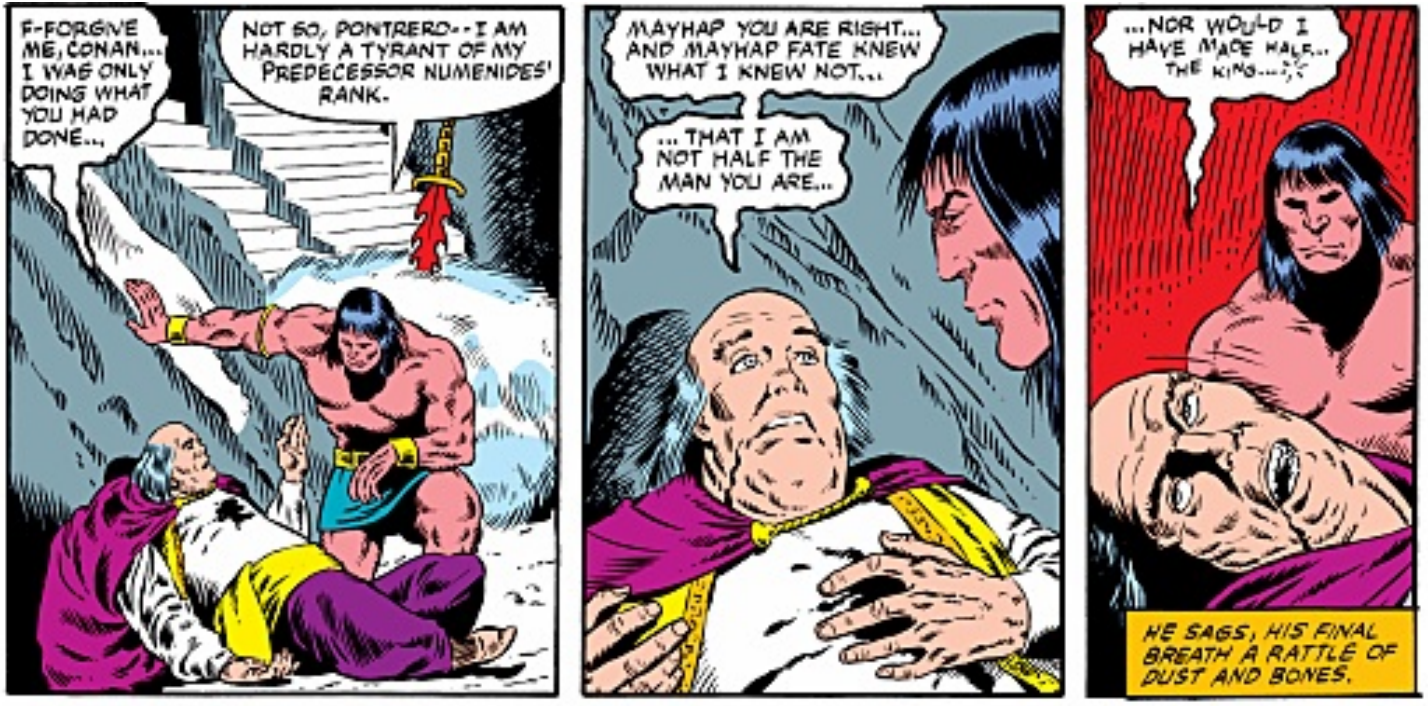
RAARRGH
--NO ONE DESERVES A DEATH DESIGNED BY DEMONS SUCH AS THESE.

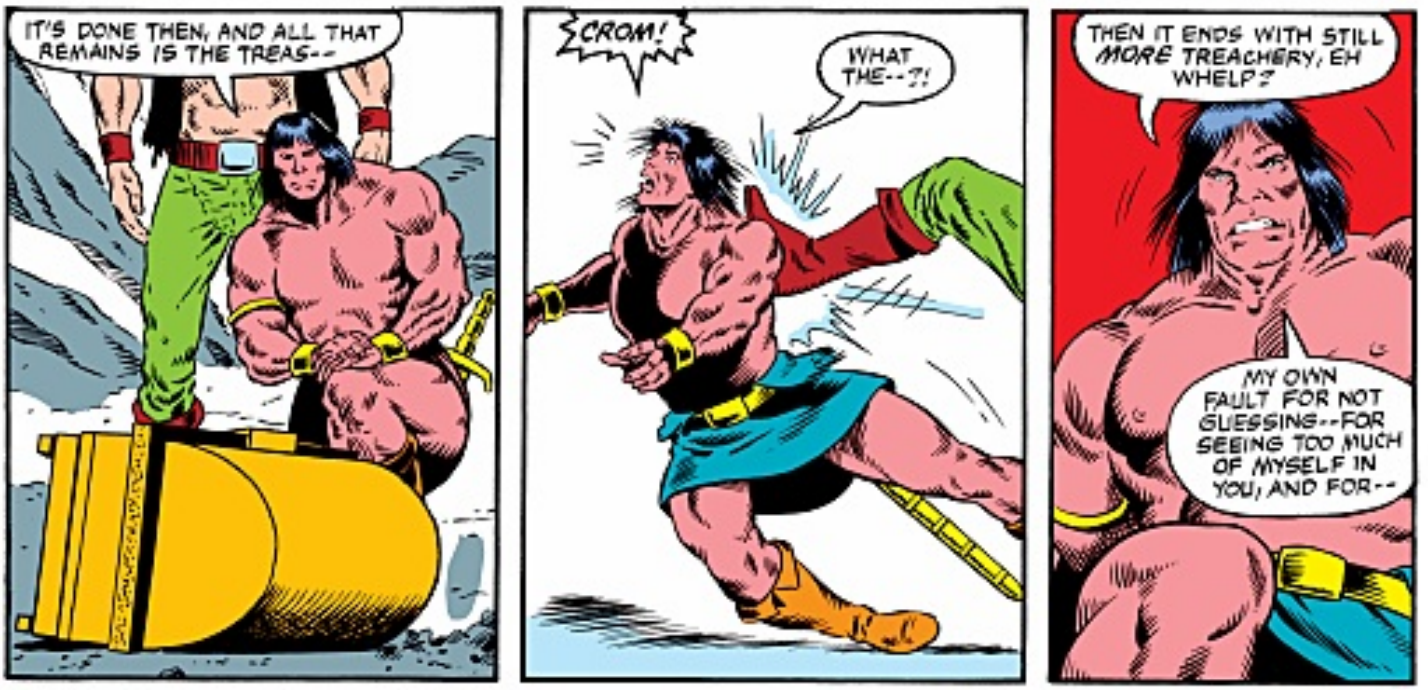
CONAN! HELP ME!
FOR THE LOVE OF MITRA, MY KING--SAVE ME!!
THE CASK OF TREASURE, AT LAST, FALLS AWAY IN THE FACE OF GREATER CONCERN...
AGH-H!
TOO LATE.
PONTRERO'S WOUNDED--AND TWO OF THE BEASTS YET REMAIN.
ENGAGE THE OTHER ONE, THANDAR--KEEP IT AWAY FROM ME!
AYE, BUT I'LL DO IT FOR THE TREASURE, CONAN--NOT FOR PONTRERO'S FAT HIDE!
SUIT YOURSELF, WHELP--YOU SOUND LIKE ME TWENTY YEARS PAST.
BUT FIGHT LIKE HELL ITSELF RIGHT NOW AND MAYHAP YOU'LL LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO REALIZE, AS I HAVE, THAT THERE ARE SOME THINGS WORTH MORE THAN TRE-
UHR?
RUHRRR
--UHN!

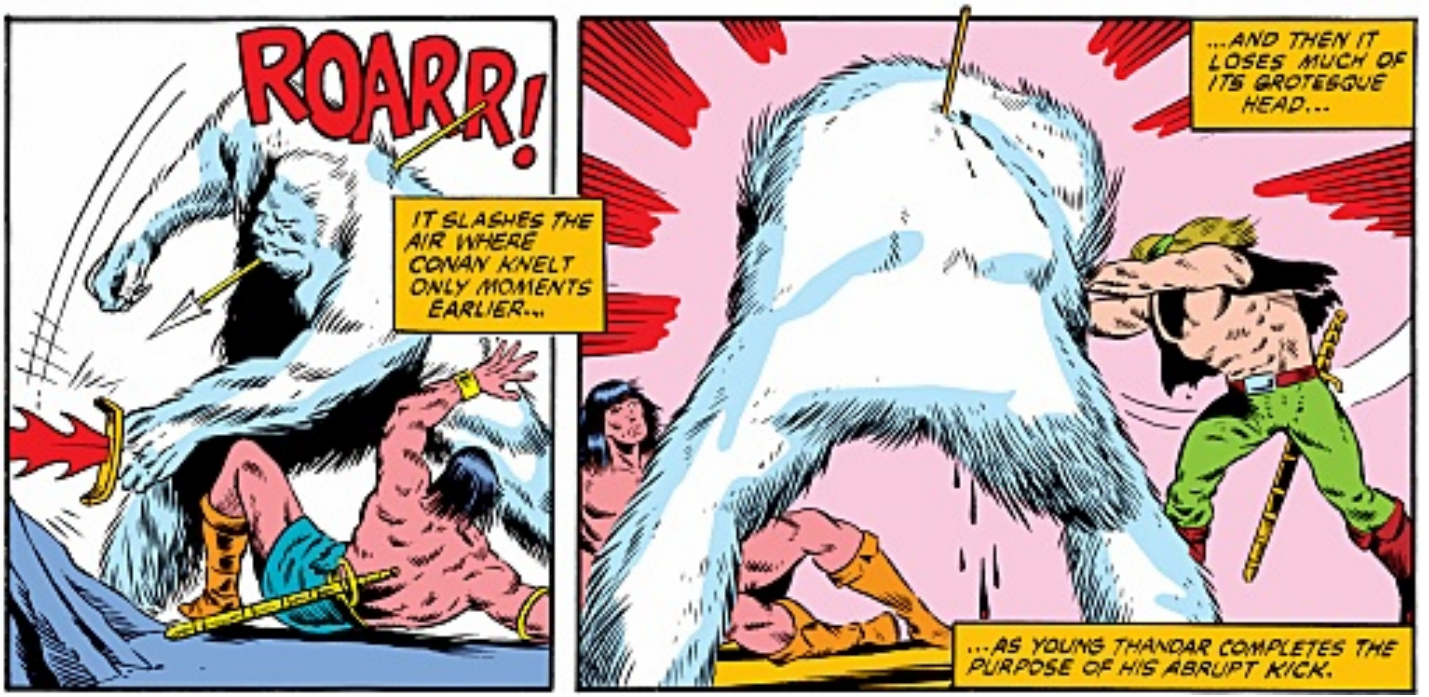
ONE THING I FORGOT, THANDAR...
DON'T LET ITS BLADE SO MUCH AS SCRATCH YOU...
THE HIDDEN ONES OFTEN TREATED THEIR FLAME KNIVES WITH BURNING POISON!
RUHRR
NOT THAT I'D INVITE A SCRATCH FROM EVEN A CLEAN BLADE SHAPED LIKE THEIRS...
...BUT--
--NOW YOU TELL ME!
EH--? CONAN! WHERE DID YOU--?
UP THERE?
PONTRERO HAS ALREADY BEEN SEVERELY SAVAGED, HE KNOWS...
...AND MAY WELL GREET HIS ANCESTORS EVEN NOW...
...BUT SINCE THERE'S STILL THE CHANCE, HOWEVER SLIGHT, THAT THE FLAME-BLADE IS UNTREATED... AND ITS POWERFUL THRUST MISSED THE NOBLE'S HEART--
--CONAN LEAPS.

BESIDES, EVEN IF PONTRERO IS DEAD, THERE IS HIS OWN SKIN TO THINK OF NOW--AND THANDAR'S AS WELL.
GRARRR
SLAYING THE BEAST MAY WELL BE THE ONLY MEANS OF ESCAPE FROM THIS HELLISH TEMPLE OF R'SHANN.
C-CONAN...
BUT PONTRERO DOES LIVE--
--ONLY BRIEFLY, FROM THE SOUND OF HIS GURGLING VOICE, YET LIVE HE DOES.
AND, TOO, DESPITE CONAN'S PROTESTS, THERE IS STILL THE LOOT TO BE HAD...
MAYHAP HE HAS NOT COME SO FAR OR SO MANY YEARS FROM YOUNG THANDAR, AFTER ALL...
HAH! MINE SEEMS NONE TOO EAGER TO FALL, CONAN!
HOW ABOUT YOURS?
DIE, CURSE YOU!
RRGK
DIE!!

WAS HE RIGHT ABOUT THESE MONSTERS?
CAN THEY BE SLAIN LIKE ANY OTHER MAN OR BEAST?
YES.
UHRUPH
AS I SAID ONCE BEFORE, CONAN...
NOT BAD FOR AN OLD MAN.
URGH?
BUT STILL...
WITH CONSIDERABLY LESS FLAIR THAN YOUTH COMMANDS.
AND LESS TIME, TOO, WHELP...
...NOT TO MENTION LESS BOASTING.
NOW--SHALL WE SEE ABOUT PONTRERO?


F-FORGIVE ME, CONAN... I WAS ONLY DOING WHAT YOU HAD DONE...
NOT SO, PONTRERO--I AM HARDLY A TYRANT OF MY PREDECESSOR NUMENIDES' RANK.
MAYHAP YOU ARE RIGHT... AND MAYHAP FATE KNEW WHAT I KNEW NOT...
... THAT I AM NOT HALF THE MAN YOU ARE...
...NOR WOULD I HAVE MADE HALF... THE KING...
HE SAGS, HIS FINAL BREATH A RATTLE OF DUST AND BONES.


IT'S DONE THEN, AND ALL THAT REMAINS IS THE TREAS--
CROM!
WHAT THE--?!
THEN IT ENDS WITH STILL MORE TREACHERY, EH WHELP?
MY OWN FAULT FOR NOT GUESSING--FOR SEEING TOO MUCH OF MYSELF IN YOU, AND FOR--


ROARR!
IT SLASHES THE AIR WHERE CONAN KNELT ONLY MOMENTS EARLIER...
...AND THEN IT LOSES MUCH OF ITS GROTESQUE HEAD...
...AS YOUNG THANDAR COMPLETES THE PURPOSE OF HIS ABRUPT KICK.

THEN HE SHEATHES HIS BLADE, GRINNING IN THE FACE OF CONAN'S AMAZEMENT...
MY APOLOGIES, THANDAR.
IN ME, IT SEEMS, AGE HAS BROUGHT NOT ENOUGH PATIENCE.
I JUDGED YOU TOO HASTILY!
NOW--AS I WAS SAYING, ALL THAT REMAINS IS THE TREASURE.
LET'S GET IT OUTSIDE AND HAVE A LOOK.
AHH... NOW THE WISDOM OF AGE FINALLY SPEAKS.
OUTSIDE, AND EVEN WITH ALL THE RICHES OF A MIGHTY KINGDOM AT HIS COMMAND, CONAN IS ACTUALLY EXCITED...
THERE! IT'S OPEN AND INSIDE WE HAVE--
MORE SEED CONES?!
AYE--RICH TREASURES INDEED TO THE CULT OF THE HIDDEN ONES, WHO'D PLACE PRIME VALUE ON THE CONJURING OF SUCH FORCES AS WE EARLIER SLEW.
BUT... ALL OF THAT... THAT ORDEAL--JUST FOR THIS?!
IT WAS HARDLY FOR NAUGHT, BOY.
AFTER ALL, YOU DID LEARN A LESSON ABOUT THE FOLLY OF WAYWARD LOVE...
A LESSON WHOSE VALUE IS EXCEEDED ONLY BY THESE SEED CONES!
BAH!
AND NOW IT IS CONAN'S TURN TO LAUGH--UPROARIOUSLY.
WHAT'S SO FUNNY, OLD MAN?
JUST THAT YOU DO INDEED REMIND ME OF YOUTH--OFT-TIMES PAINFULLY SO.
OH? AND YOU'RE SO MUCH WISER WITH ONE FOOT IN YOUR GRAVE? YOU WERE TAKEN IN JUST AS MUCH AS I!
WAS I? THE COFFERS OF AQUILONIA ALREADY OVERFLOW WITH MORE RICHES THAN I CAN COUNT.
I JOINED YOUR MAD AND MERRY CHASE FOR THE SHEER JOY OF IT...

... AND I LEARNED LONG AGO THAT WHEN IT COMES TO TREASURE, THE PURSUIT IS MORE REWARDING THAN THE POSSESSION, BY FAR.
GRUDGINGLY, SHEEPISHLY, THANDAR SMILES IN RETURN.
AYE... AT LEAST WE HAD A TIME OF IT, DID WE NOT?
YOU'RE A FINE EXAMPLE INDEED, CONAN-- A PITY IT MUST END...
AYE...
WITHER NOW, THANDAR?
WANDERING, I GUESS... THE REWARD OF FURTHER PURSUIT.
NO REASON TO RETURN TO TARANTIA--SO MAYHAP I'LL STRIKE OUT TO THE SOUTH THIS TIME, FOR STYGIA.
STYGIA...
AYE, THERE'S MUCH TO DO IN THAT SHADOWED LAND.
WHEN ONE ESCAPES STYGIA ALIVE, ONE KNOWS HE HAS TRULY LIVED...
WELL. FAREWELL, ROGUE--YOU HAVE DREAMS TO SHAPE AND LEGENDS TO CARVE.
...WHILE I HAVE A KINGDOM TO NURSEMAID.
JUST DON'T FOLLOW MY EXAMPLE ON ONE SCORE-- FOR NOT EVERY FOOL'S PATH CAN END AT THE FOOT OF A THRONE.
FEAR NOT, CONAN--MY AMBITION RISES NOT THAT HIGH.
BUT THEN AGAIN, OLD MAN...
...EVEN IDOLS EVENTUALLY NEED REPLACING.
END.

KING CONAN

% MARVEL COMICS GROUP
387 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

DENNIS O'NEIL
EDITOR
RALPH MACCHIO
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Editors,

KING CONAN #13 was the best issue of this title published so far. Doug's writing captures the essential Conan, and it is a pleasure to see a cast of permanent supporting characters at last. But the thing that made this issue exceptional was the arrival of Mark Silvestri as regular penciler. I'm hoping to see Mr. Silvestri's artwork gracing this book for a long time. Don't get me wrong, John Buscema and Ernie Chan are just great, but it's about time someone came along to share the Conan workload. Good luck, Mark!

Some suggestions for the future: multi-issue storylines; fewer evil wizards; an occasional humorous tale, not necessarily satirical — after all, life is more than hacking at rebels and monsters with a broadsword, even for the king of Aquilonia. As for letters page title, how about "King's Chronicles" or "Monarch's Mail"?

Keep up the great work.

Rick Platt
Purchase Brook Road 1228
Southbury, CT 06488

Well, Rick, Silvestri's Cimmerian seems to have captured the fancy of anyone within half a Hyborian league of issue #13 if our mail is any indication. And those of you lucky enough to have been here for Mr. Silvestri's debut, don't be selfish now, y'hear? Pass the word around that the new-look KING CONAN's *worth* a look. (As a matter of fact, we ourselves thought that Mark's version of the Khitan dragon was one of the more dramatic and colorful beasts to have given our Aquilonian Ace a workout in some time.)

Dear Denny and Ralph,

Today I received my subscription copy of KING CONAN #13. It was magnificent! I loved it all, especially the exotic, multi-colored web in which Conan fought the homunculi. My only question would be with the credibility of Conan's hang-glider, a little bit far out? The ending was just great. Keep it up.

John Locke
3 Ware Road
Auburndale, MA 02166

Wait a minute, John. You mean little pink homunculi are okay, but home-made hang-glider stretches the imagination? Seriously though, we understand what you're suggesting — that technological innovations in the stories must be measured against the general level of technology in the Hyborian age while fantasy elements have rules of their own. For a handle on both we'd like to recommend *The Blades of Conan*, a collection of R.E. Howard/Hyborian-related essays edited by L. Sprague De Camp for Ace Books. No compleat Conanophile should be without it.

Dear Denny,

I have just finished reading KING CONAN #13 and would like to offer the following comments. First off, the cover was great, one of the best ever to appear here. Talk about realism in the Hyborian Age — how many monsters go around with broken nails? By the way, did Conan invent the hang-glider?

The wizards and wizardess were excellently portrayed despite their being a shade stereotypical. The story itself was also excellent, though I would have loved to see it spread over several issues with Conan battling one wizard per issue. The art by Mark Silvestri was terrific, maintaining the highest standards of the series.

Now, some suggestions. How about letting King Conan take to the seas again for an issue or two? Or how about engaging the Kingdom of Aquilonia in a multi-issue war? Conan is always at his best in battle, and we could stand to see a real war between nations after the more limited rebellions of the last few issues.

Finally, to address the problem of Conan's beard, as raised in issue #13's letter column. I think I have a simple solution to explain the sudden growth of hair on the king in #11. Conan may have a rare genetic disorder inherited by him from his ancestors. This disorder retards the growth of facial hair until the age of fifty or so; it's a sort of "delayed puberty syndrome" which affects only Conan and a few others. Do you buy that, huh?

Well, that's all for now. Keep up the great work.

Carlos Hinojosa
2013 Jay Avenue
McAllen, TX 78501

Make sure to check out this past summer's CONAN THE BARBARIAN ANNUAL #7, Carlos, if you haven't already done so. It's King-Sized and (surprise!) *King* Conan stars in an exciting tale that takes our barbarian out on the bounding main as per your suggestion.

As for the savage *beard* of Conan — well, Crom's whiskers, the controversy still rages, and your solution is but one among many as evidenced by the next two responses.

Dear Editors,

After reading the letters page to issue #13, I began to think about how Conan was able to grow a beard in an earlier story, and I've come to the conclusion that, as argued by Mr. Tierstein, Conan does not, as a rule, need to shave. This seems obvious. But the solution may not be as difficult as at first appears. Let's not forget that the time period with which we are dealing is the Hyborian Age where magic thrives and almost anything is possible through wizardry. On several occasions Conan himself has been transformed into another creature altogether. It would be simple enough and reasonable enough to assume that the King purchased the services of a local sorcerer who, with a few magic words, provided the normally beardless monarch with a hairy disguise that sprouted during his journey and lasted for the necessary period of time.

Kevin Lindenmuth
36038 Crompton Circle
Farmington Hills, MI 48018

Dear Editor,

In KING CONAN #13, you requested assistance in explaining how Conan suddenly was able to grow a beard. One possible solution stares us right in the face, and that is that Conan was always able to grow a beard and simply shaved regularly off-panel. A battle-hardened warrior such as Conan would have little need of water or a razor to remove his beard. Conan never goes anywhere without a sword which may be sharpened with a rock, a piece of flint, or even a leather saddle strap. Many other objects may be used to shave with as well, such as a sharpened shell, a piece of metal armor, or the buckle of a sword belt. These are just a few of the makeshift "razors" with which Conan would always have found himself surrounded.

All men have facial hair. In the case of the American Indians (as, I imagine, analogously in the case of the Picts) facial hair is often pulled out by the roots, and thus beards are rare. I hope this letter will have helped you.

Freddie W. Young
Rt 1, Box 610
Kountze, TX 77625

Thanks for the theorizing, Freddie and Kevin. Your letters represent the basic ideas put forward by the majority of respondents. But we're not ready to close the casebooks on the subject of Hyborian hirsuteness just yet, so if there's anyone still left out there who'd like to add his or her two drachmas to the debate, we're waiting to hear from you.

Dear Marvel,

Although the credits in KING CONAN #11 did not include John Buscema, it was still a terrific issue. Doug Moench's script was just great — I loved it! I think the best things in this issue were the establishment of Conan's friends, their true feelings for him, and his own memories of his youth. Robert E. Howard would be proud of your wonderful job, Doug.

I enjoyed Alan Kupperberg's artwork and especially Conan with a beard, but I think that perhaps Conan's strength was too exaggerated in his duel with the Death-Shaper. I find it hard to believe that Conan could really have deflected that massive blade. Still, other than this minor quibble, I find KING CONAN #11 to be another classic. Thanks for the great reading.

Justin Sayres
Mafeking Road
Goonengerry, Via Lismore
2480
Australia

If you're seeking John Buscema's credits these days, Justin, you'll find them, appropriately, on the two magazines that Big John B. himself helped to establish as the biggest sword & sorcery hits in the comics biz — and that's CONAN THE BARBARIAN and companion mag SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN. And you'll want to treat yourself to Big Buscema's latest barbarian outing this fall, KULL THE CONQUEROR #1. There's 48 pages of Buscema pencils, Bulanadi inks, and authentic KULLors by Marie Severin herself — all of this and Alan Zelenetz's original script on special stock and gift-wrapped in a stunning John Bolton wraparound cover.

Well, there you have it, royal subjects, from Australia to Aquilonia. You may rise now, so long as you promise to be here when King Conan's court is called into session next issue around. Until then...

COVER PENCILER & INKER: MARC SILVESTRI

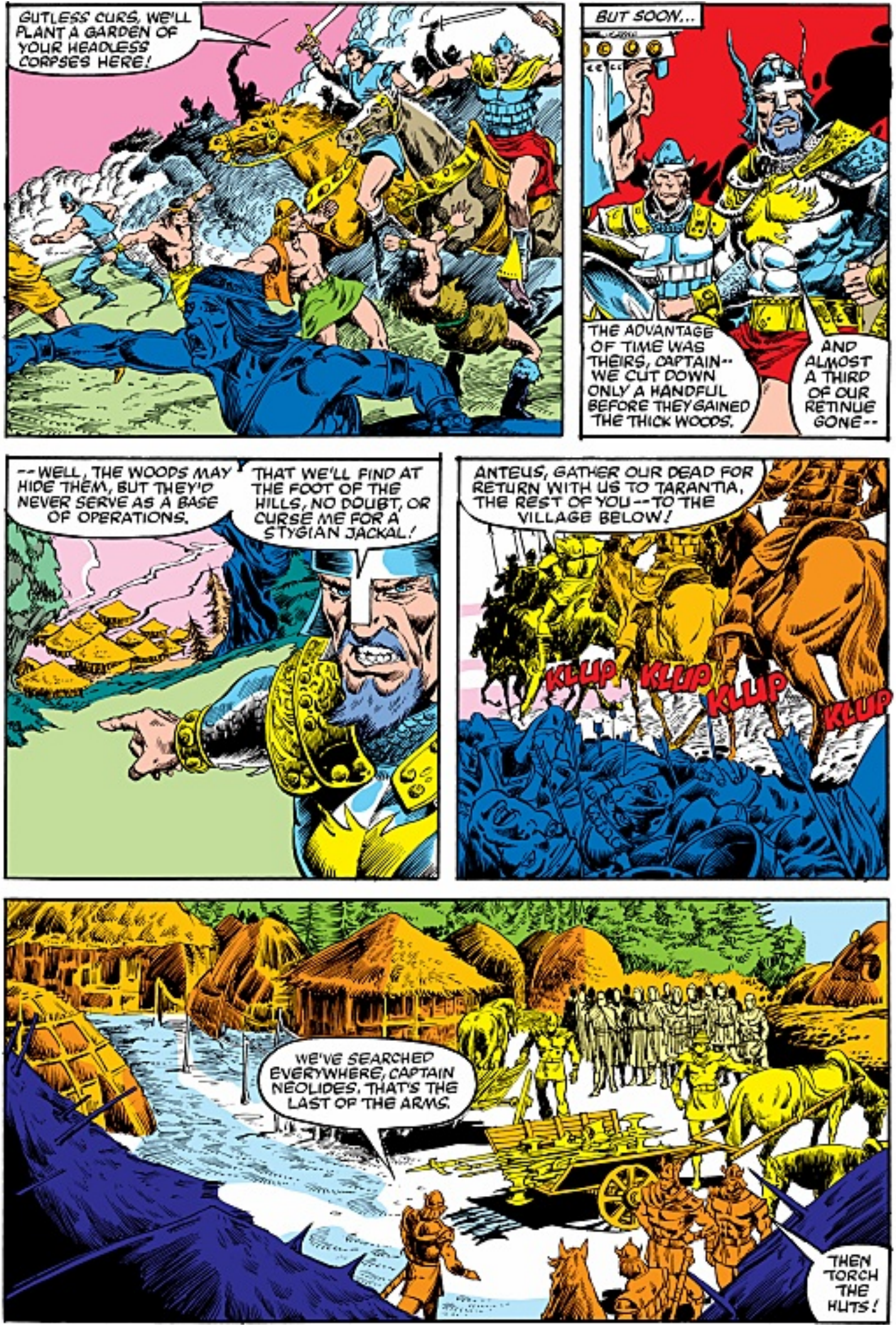
Stan Lee PRESENTS:

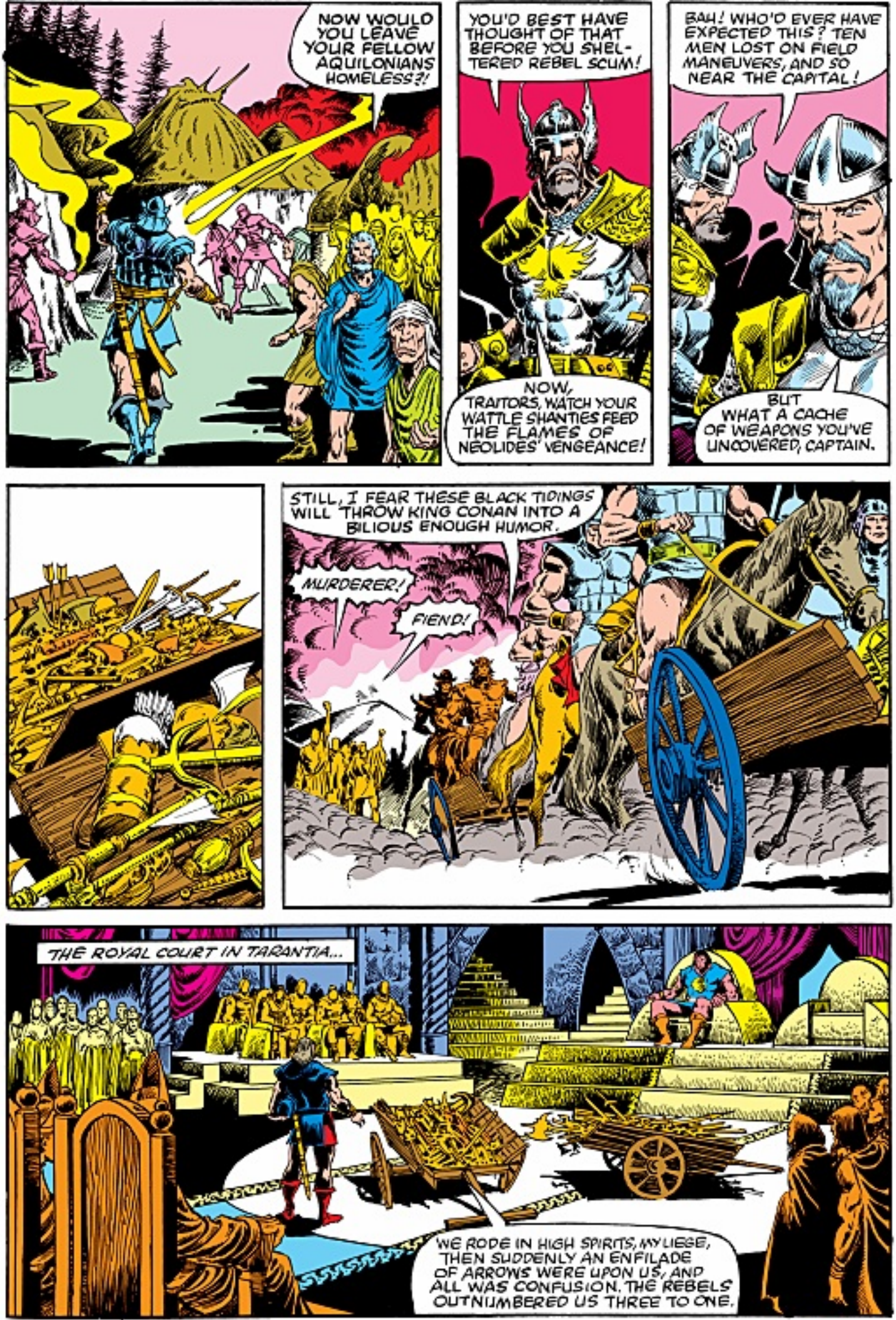
KING CONAN

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD

ALAN ZELENETZ SCRIPTER | MARK SILVESTRI PENCILER | RICARDO VILLAMONTE INKER | MORELLI & PARKER LETTERERS | GEORGE ROUSSOS COLOR | LARRY HAMA EDITOR | JIM SHOOTER IN CHIEF

MITRA! REBELS RAKING US FROM ALL SIDES!
NOCK
FHWIT
THIT
THIT
THIT
OH!
BREAK AND SCATTER!
HOLD YOUR MOUNTS, SOLDIERS OF AQUILONIA!
HNNHNN
THROUGH THE FOREST, QUICKLY!
THUMP
AFTER THEM!
GADUP GADUP
GADUP


GUTLESS CURS, WE'LL PLANT A GARDEN OF YOUR HEADLESS CORPSES HERE!
BUT SOON...
THE ADVANTAGE OF TIME WAS THEIRS, CAPTAIN-- WE CUT DOWN ONLY A HANDFUL BEFORE THEY GAINED THE THICK WOODS.
AND ALMOST A THIRD OF OUR RETINUE GONE--
--WELL, THE WOODS MAY HIDE THEM, BUT THEY'D NEVER SERVE AS A BASE OF OPERATIONS.
THAT WE'LL FIND AT THE FOOT OF THE HILLS, NO DOUBT, OR CURSE ME FOR A STYGIAN JACKAL!
ANTEUS, GATHER OUR DEAD FOR RETURN WITH US TO TARANTIA, THE REST OF YOU--TO THE VILLAGE BELOW!
KLUP
KLUP
KLUP
KLUP
WE'VE SEARCHED EVERYWHERE, CAPTAIN NEOLIDES. THAT'S THE LAST OF THE ARMS.
THEN TORCH THE HUTS!


NOW WOULD YOU LEAVE YOUR FELLOW AQUILONIANS HOMELESS?!
YOU'D BEST HAVE THOUGHT OF THAT BEFORE YOU SHELTERED REBEL SCUM!
NOW, TRAITORS, WATCH YOUR WATTLE SHANTIES FEED THE FLAMES OF NEOLIDES' VENGEANCE!
BAH! WHO'D EVER HAVE EXPECTED THIS? TEN MEN LOST ON FIELD MANEUVERS, AND SO NEAR THE CAPITAL!
BUT WHAT A CACHE OF WEAPONS YOU'VE UNCOVERED, CAPTAIN.
STILL, I FEAR THESE BLACK TIDINGS WILL THROW KING CONAN INTO A BILIOUS ENOUGH HUMOR.
MURDERER!
FIEND!
THE ROYAL COURT IN TARANTIA...
WE RODE IN HIGH SPIRITS, MY LIEGE, THEN SUDDENLY AN ENFILADE OF ARROWS WERE UPON US, AND ALL WAS CONFUSION. THE REBELS OUTNUMBERED US THREE TO ONE.

I'VE HEARD ENOUGH, NEOLIDES!
GRIMLY, CONAN, KING OF AQUILONIA RISES FROM HIS THRONE...

...AND THE ECHO OF HIS VOICE QUIVERS ON THE AIR, A FAINT HISS IN A HALL NOW GROWN TO A TERRIBLE SILENCE...

SO THIS IS THE HARVEST OF OUR VILLAGE FARMERS--

--AND A BUMPER CROP, IT SEEMS!

CHAK

NOW WHAT HAVE WE HERE? AH, KAMBUJAN KNIVES...

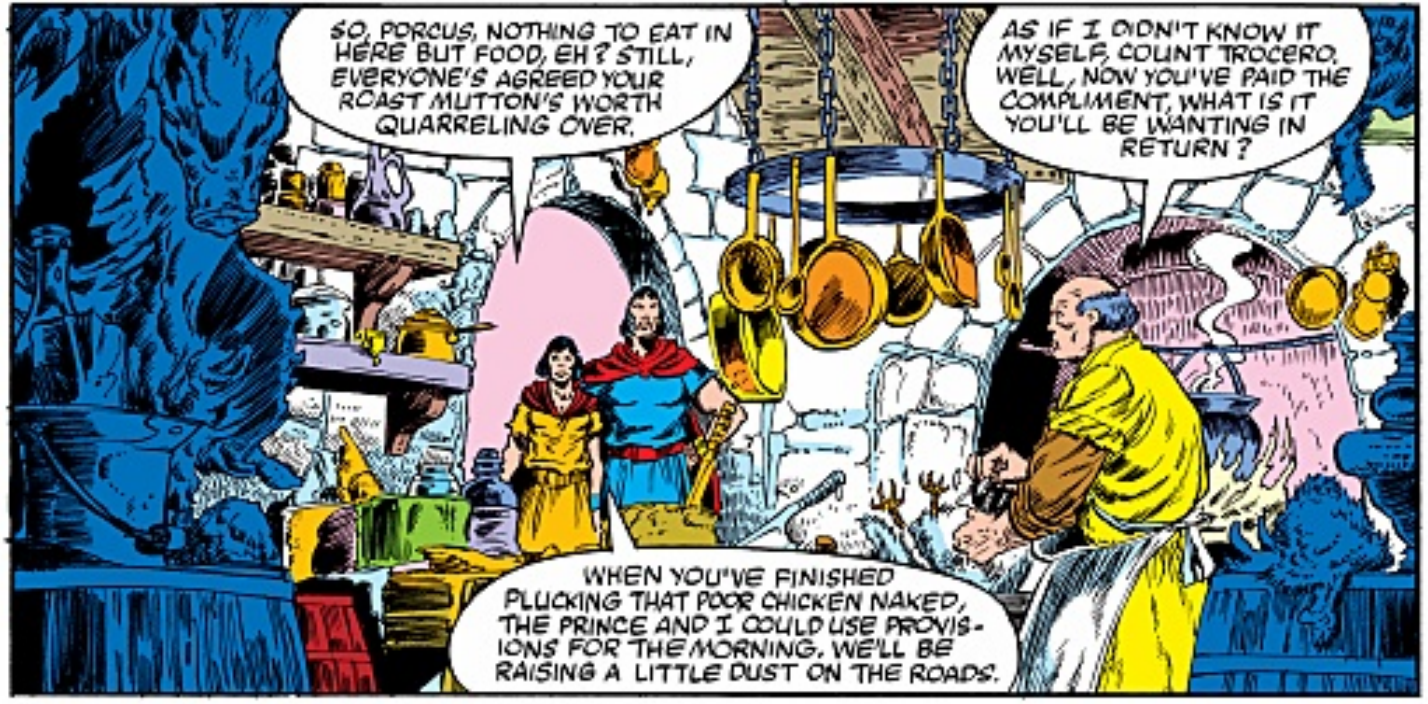
...AND CROSSBOWS, WELL, WELL, WELL...

...POLEAXES, DAGGERS...

...MORNINGSTARS!

CROM'S BLOOD, HAS AQUILONIA BECOME A NATION OF IRONSMITHS ARMING THEMSELVES AGAINST THE CROWN?! NO, THESE WEAPONS ARE FORGED ELSEWHERE AND SMUGGLED ACROSS OUR BORDERS!
BUT THEY ARE A CLEAR DANGER IN THE HANDS OF OUR CITIZENS!
A DANGER INDEED, SIRE!
WHO--?
DOES PRINCE CONN DARE?!
BUT GREAT ENOUGH TO JUSTIFY THE TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF A VILLAGE?!
MY PRINCE, IF YOU'LL PERMIT, IT IS THE REBELS WHO CHOSE TO HIDE AMONG WOMEN AND CHILDREN. IT WAS OUR TASK TO ROOT THEM OUT!
WE DID NOT SEEK TO HARM CIVILIANS, BUT THERE COMES A TIME WHEN WE MUST SET AN EXAMPLE THAT WE'LL NOT TOLERATE SEDITION AGAINST THE KING, YOUR FATHER!
YOU FED AN ENTIRE VILLAGE TO THE FLAMES, GUILTY AND INNOCENT ALIKE! AND THIS EVENING REPORTS HAVE IT THERE ARE HUMAN BONES AMONG THE ASHES!
CIVILIAN CASUALTIES ARE REGRETTABLE, BUT INEVITABLE, I FEAR, ESPECIALLY WHEN COMMON FOLK CONSORT WITH SKULKING REBELS.
WHO'D BREED LIKE FESTERING MAGGOTS IF WE'D GIVE THEM LICENSE, UNTIL THE ENTIRE REALM CRAWLED WITH THEM!
AND THEN WHAT OF AQUILONIA'S DESTINED PEACE AND PROSPERITY?

BUT WHAT PRICE PROSPERITY, FATHER? SOME OF THOSE PEOPLE MAY HAVE BEEN UNWILLING PAWNS--
BUT THIS IS A KINGDOM OF MANY SUBJECTS, CONN. OFTEN WE MUST MAKE OUR DECISIONS FOR THE GREATER GOOD--
AND IS THE SWORD THE ONLY MEANS OF DECISION MAKING?
HEAR, HEAR!
AYE, CONN!
WOULD YOU HAVE ME BANDY WORDS WITH THIS BOW AND ITS ARCHER?!
OR DEBATE THOSE WHO WOULD THROW THIS KINGDOM BACK TO SCURVY DESPOTS?!
SNAP
STILL, OUR SOLDIERS OVERREACTED AFTER THE FACT AND SHOULD BE PUBLICLY REBUKED BY THEIR SOVEREIGN FOR--
BILE AND WORMWOOD, DO YOU DARE BOY?!!
YOUR MAJESTY, THE SITUATION IS ONE THAT NATURALLY LENDS ITSELF TO CONTROVERSY. NOW TEMPERS FLARE--
--LET ME TAKE THE PRINCE--
TAKE THE YOUNG COLT, TROCERO, AND REIN HIM IN--
HA! WOULD YOU TEACH YOUR SIRE TO BE KING AND YOU STILL WET BEHIND THE EARS, WHELP?!


SO, PORCUS, NOTHING TO EAT IN HERE BUT FOOD, EH? STILL, EVERYONE'S AGREED YOUR ROAST MUTTON'S WORTH QUARRELING OVER.
AS IF I DIDN'T KNOW IT MYSELF, COUNT TROCERO. WELL, NOW YOU'VE PAID THE COMPLIMENT, WHAT IS IT YOU'LL BE WANTING IN RETURN?
WHEN YOU'VE FINISHED PLUCKING THAT POOR CHICKEN NAKED, THE PRINCE AND I COULD USE PROVISIONS FOR THE MORNING. WE'LL BE RAISING A LITTLE DUST ON THE ROADS.

YOU SEE, PRINCE CONN, THERE ARE MANY WAYS -- SLURP -- TO SPICE A STEW, AND MANY WAYS TO RULE A KINGDOM AS LARGE AS AQUILONIA.
AHH, THAT'S GOOD!

YOUR FATHER'S TASK IS NO EASY ONE, FOR PLEASING ONE SUBJECT OFTIMES MEANS DISPLEASING ANOTHER. QUITE COMPLICATED INDEED.
AND YOUR EXPERIENCE -- EVEN WITH YOUR INITIAL ARMY TRAINING -- IS, WELL, SHALL WE SAY, UM, RATHER LIMITED?

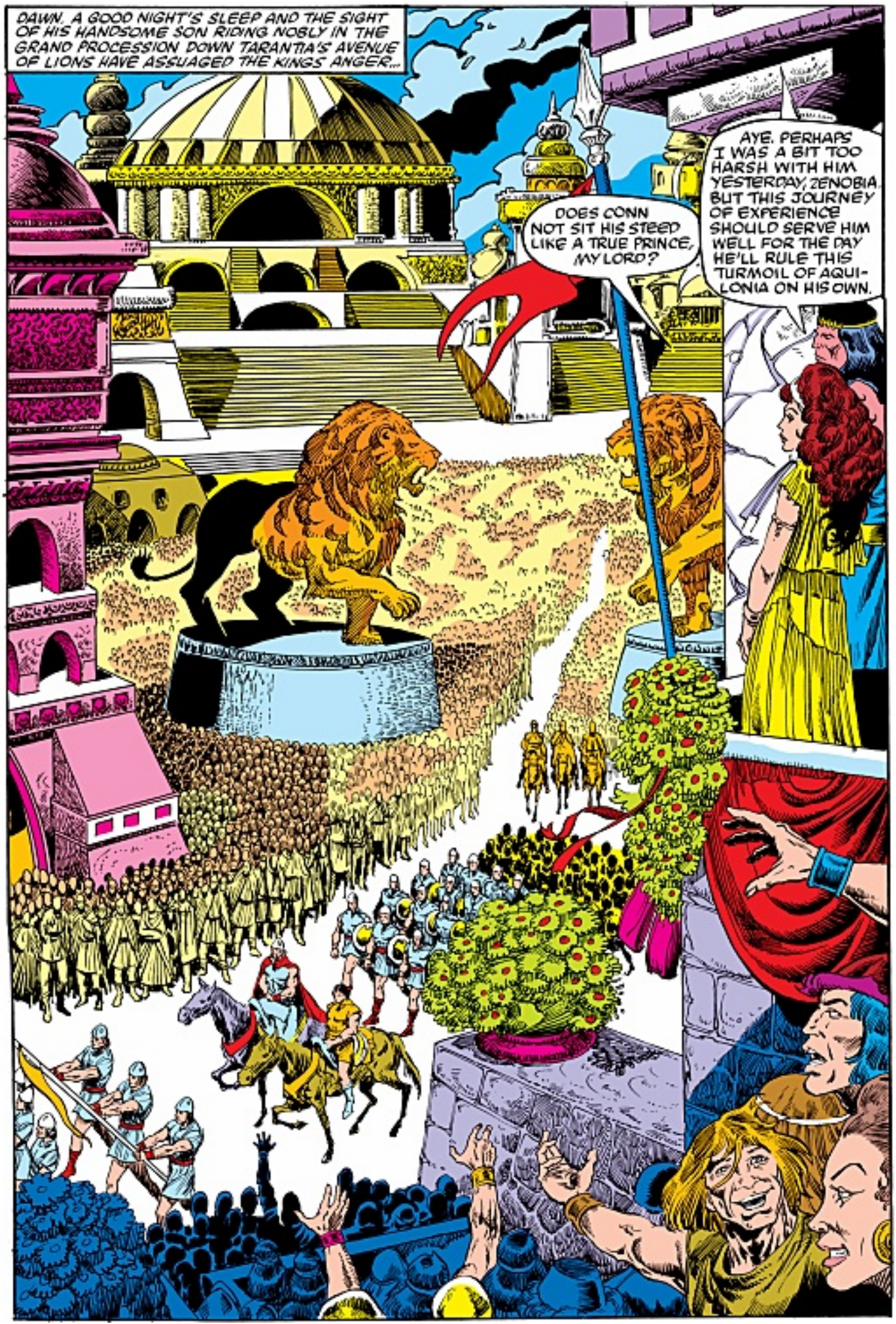
PERHAPS, TROCERO, STILL, MY MOTHER, THE QUEEN, SAYS THAT WE ARE A CIVILIZED PEOPLE AND NOT BARBARIANS.

GOOD NIGHT, PORCUS. AND SO WE ARE, LAD, BUT WE LIVE IN AN UNCIVILIZED WORLD, THOUGH YOUR FATHER'S BROUGHT MUCH PROGRESS.
WHAT YOU NEED IS A GOOD HARD LOOK AT THE WORLD, MY PRINCE. TOMORROW, THEN, AT DAWN.

BUT DAWN IS A WHILE OFF, AND ELSEWHERE IN THE ROYAL PALACE...
TELL ME, WAS THIS REALLY NECESSARY AFTER SUCH A DAY, ZENOBIA?
BUT MY LORD--

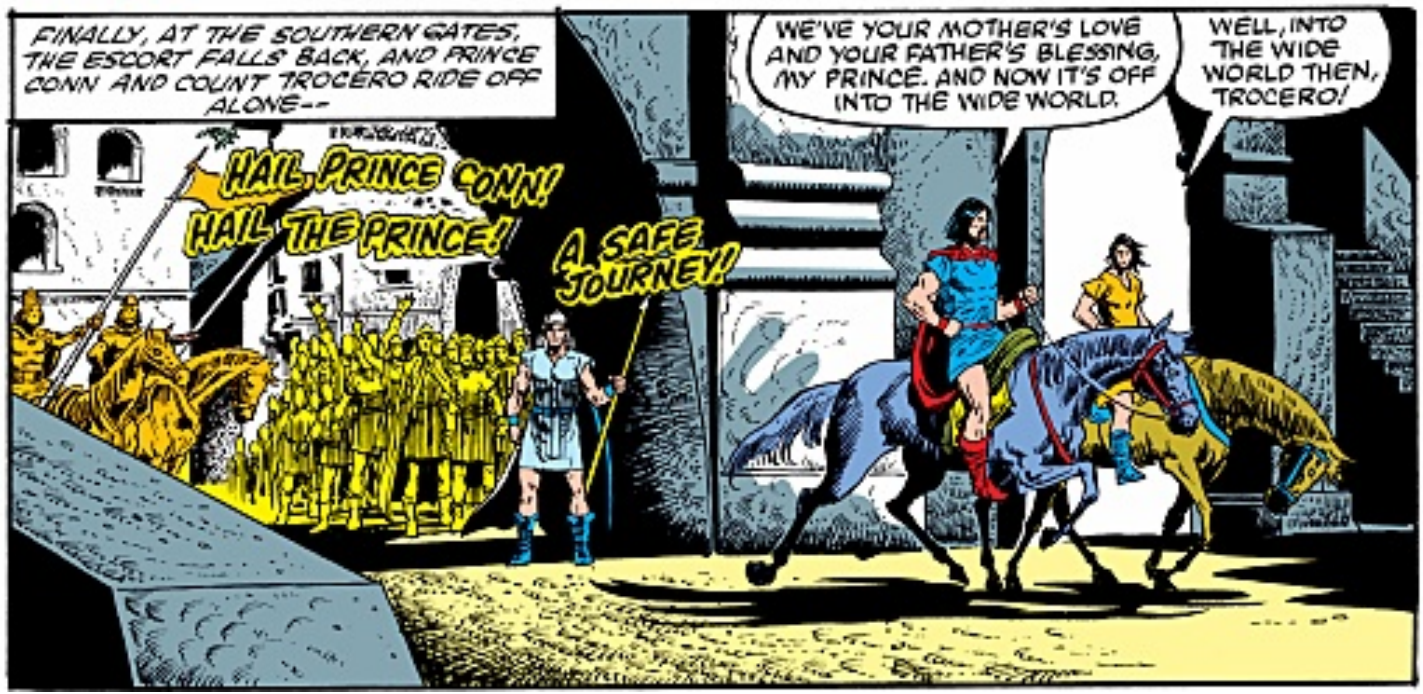
NO MORE! ENOUGH OF THIS FRIVOLITY!
DOES OUR MUSIC DISPLEASE, YOUR MAJESTY?
DOGS VANAHEIM LIE NORTH, MAN?!
YOUR KING'S SPIRITS ARE DOWNCAST THIS NIGHT. BE SO KIND AS TO QUIT THE CHAMBER.
HARUMPH. BETTER A HUNGRY LION'S DEN THAN THE COURT WHEN CONAN'S IN ONE OF HIS MELANCHOLIES.

FRIPPERY AND 'FINE MUSIC'-- IS THIS THE CULTURE YOU'VE BEEN FEEDING OUR SON?
YOU AGREED TO ALL, CONAN.
BAH! BUT YOU'VE OVER-CIVILIZED THE LAD. HOW HE TURNED ON ME TODAY--
CONAN, YOU'VE SEEN HOW CONN IDOLIZES YOU. BUT HE'S A YOUNG MAN NOW AND, LIKE ALL YOUNG MEN, HE BEGINS TO THINK FOR HIMSELF.
I'LL NOT HAVE A STRIPLING-- NOT EVEN MY OWN HEIR-- PLAY PHILOSOPHER TO ME!
I TRUST TROCERO WILL SEE TO THAT AND TEACH THE BOY TO THINK LIKE A FUTURE KING OF THE GREATEST REALM IN ALL HYBORIA.
STILL, HE'S THE CROWN PRINCE, AND DESPITE MY PRESENT DISPLEASURE WITH HIM, HE'S TO BE ACCORDED A FULL HONOR ESCORT TO THE SOUTHERN GATES IN THE MORNING.


DAWN. A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP AND THE SIGHT OF HIS HANDSOME SON RIDING NOBLY IN THE GRAND PROCESSION DOWN TARANTIA'S AVENUE OF LIONS HAVE ASSUAGED THE KINGS ANGER...
DOES CONN NOT SIT HIS STEED LIKE A TRUE PRINCE, MY LORD?
AYE. PERHAPS I WAS A BIT TOO HARSH WITH HIM YESTERDAY, ZENOBIA. BUT THIS JOURNEY OF EXPERIENCE SHOULD SERVE HIM WELL FOR THE DAY HE'LL RULE THIS TURMOIL OF AQUILONIA ON HIS OWN.

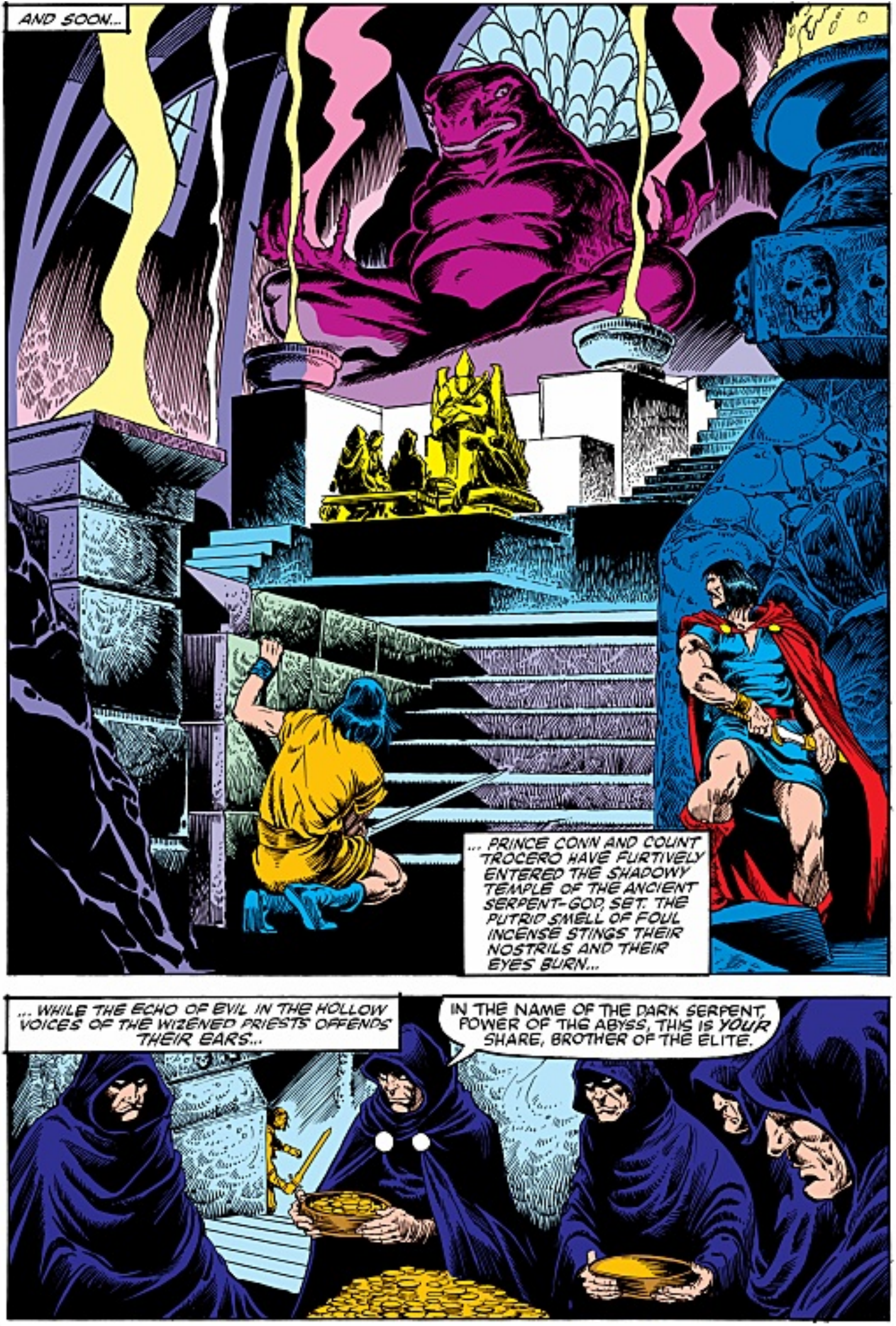
BUT THE PRINCE, WITH THE STUBBORNNESS OF YOUTH IS LESS FORGIVING IN HIS MANNER.
THOUGH, IN TRUTH, HE WOULD HAIL HIS FATHER FAREWELL, HIS PRIDE FORBIDS HIM DO SO--PERHAPS ONLY THUS WILL THE KING RECOGNIZE HIM FOR THE MAN HE HAS BECOME.

HAIL THE PRINCE
MITRA BE WITH YOU MY LIEGE!

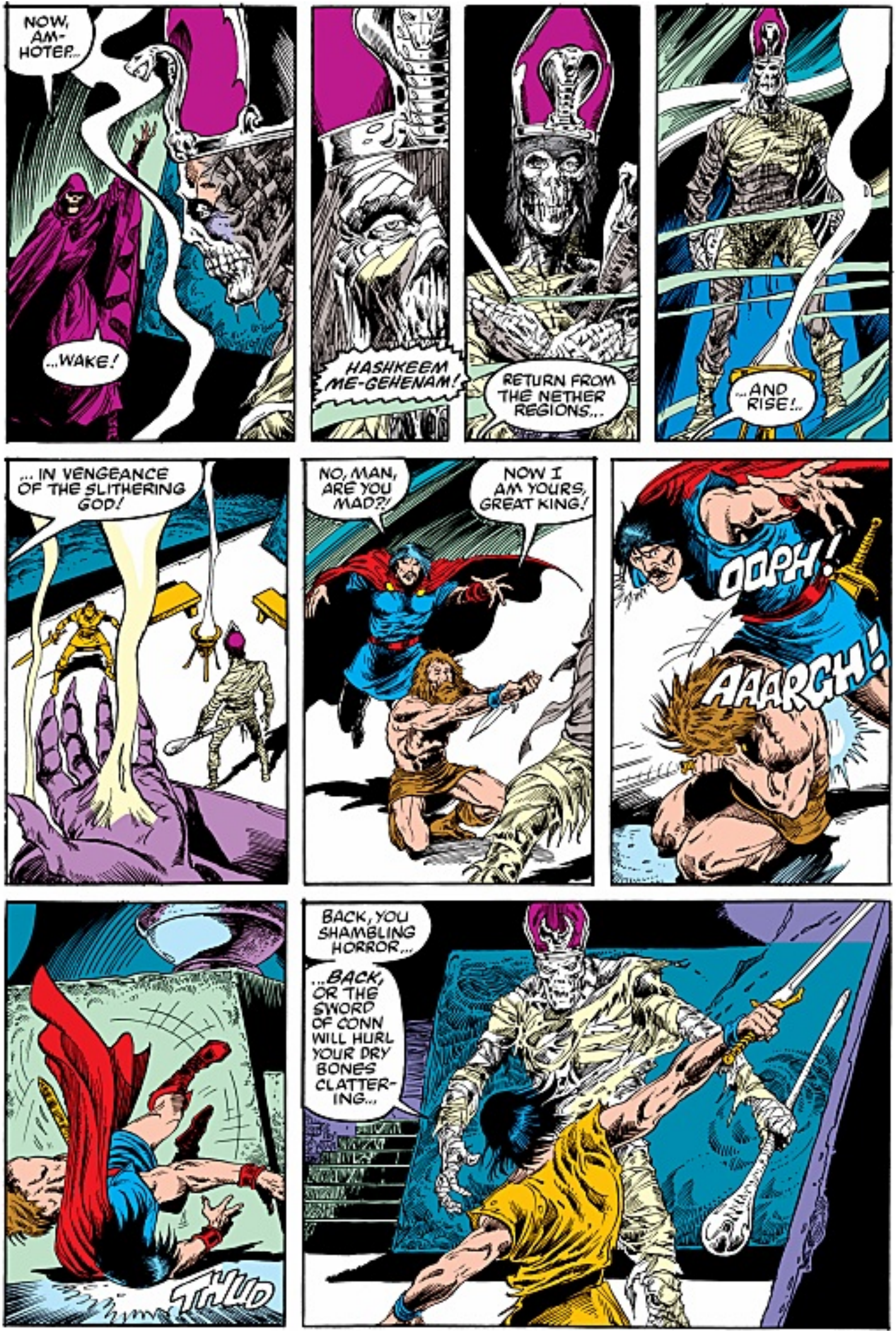

FINALLY, AT THE SOUTHERN GATES, THE ESCORT FALLS BACK, AND PRINCE CONN AND COUNT TROCERO RIDE OFF ALONE--
HAIL, PRINCE CONN!
HAIL THE PRINCE!
A SAFE JOURNEY!
WE'VE YOUR MOTHER'S LOVE AND YOUR FATHER'S BLESSING, MY PRINCE. AND NOW IT'S OFF INTO THE WIDE WORLD.
WELL, INTO THE WIDE WORLD THEN, TROCERO!

DAYS LATER...
SO WE RETURN TO SINISTER STYGIA. BUT I'VE HEARD THE STREETS WERE LINED WITH SORCERERS, TROCERO? OR WAS THAT ONLY THE CITY OF NEGTHU?
THEY'VE AN EXCESS OF WIZARDRY AND BLACK MAGIC HERE, YOU CAN BE SURE, LAD, BUT CONJURORS HAUNT TOMBS AND TEMPLES, NOT CARAVAN ROUTES!
A PIECE OF BREAD FROM YOUR PACK, SIRS.
SET BLESS YE!
FOOD! FOOD!
FOOD, GOOD SIRS!
WHAT IS THIS, A CITY OF BEGGARS? DON'T YOUR FIELDS ALONG THE RIVER STYX YIELD GRAIN APLENTY?
BREAD, A CRUMB SIR!
OUR GRAIN'S COLLECTED BY THE PRIESTS OF SET TO FEED THE SOUL OF THE GREAT AM-HOTEP, OUR GUARDIAN KING WHO SITS THE THRONE OF LIFE AND DEATH.

THEIR KING, AM-HOTEP, IS DEAD. HIS EMBALMED BODY SITS LIFELESS ON A THRONE OF BLACK OBSIDIAN, AND THE PRIESTS HAVE SEIZED POWER IN HIS NAME. THEY RULE THESE SUPERSTITIOUS FOLK BY TERROR AND NECROMANCY, ALL THE WHILE AMASSING THE LAND'S WEALTH. THE CITIZENS MORE FEARFUL FOR THEIR SOULS THAN FOR THEIR FLESHLESS BONES LIVE IN STARVATION AND DIRE POVERTY.
THESE ARE PEOPLE WHO HAVE NEVER KNOWN HAPPINESS AND WOULD NOT EVEN KNOW HOW TO LONG FOR IT.
OUT OF MY WAY!
IN THE NAME OF AM-HOTEP, KHAMIL THE STYGIAN YIELDS HIS LIFE IN LIEU OF GRAIN OR PENNY!
CLAT CLATTER
WHERE ARE THEY TAKING THAT OLD MAN?
TO BE SACRIFICED IN THE TEMPLE OF SET.
THEN WE MUST FOLLOW AND SAVE HIM, TROCERO!


AND SOON...
... PRINCE CONN AND COUNT TROCERO HAVE FURTIVELY ENTERED THE SHADOWY TEMPLE OF THE ANCIENT SERPENT-GOD, SET. THE PUTRID SMELL OF FOUL INCENSE STINGS THEIR NOSTRILS AND THEIR EYES BURN...
... WHILE THE ECHO OF EVIL IN THE HOLLOW VOICES OF THE WIZENED PRIESTS OFFENDS THEIR EARS...
IN THE NAME OF THE DARK SERPENT, POWER OF THE ABYSS, THIS IS YOUR SHARE, BROTHER OF THE ELITE.

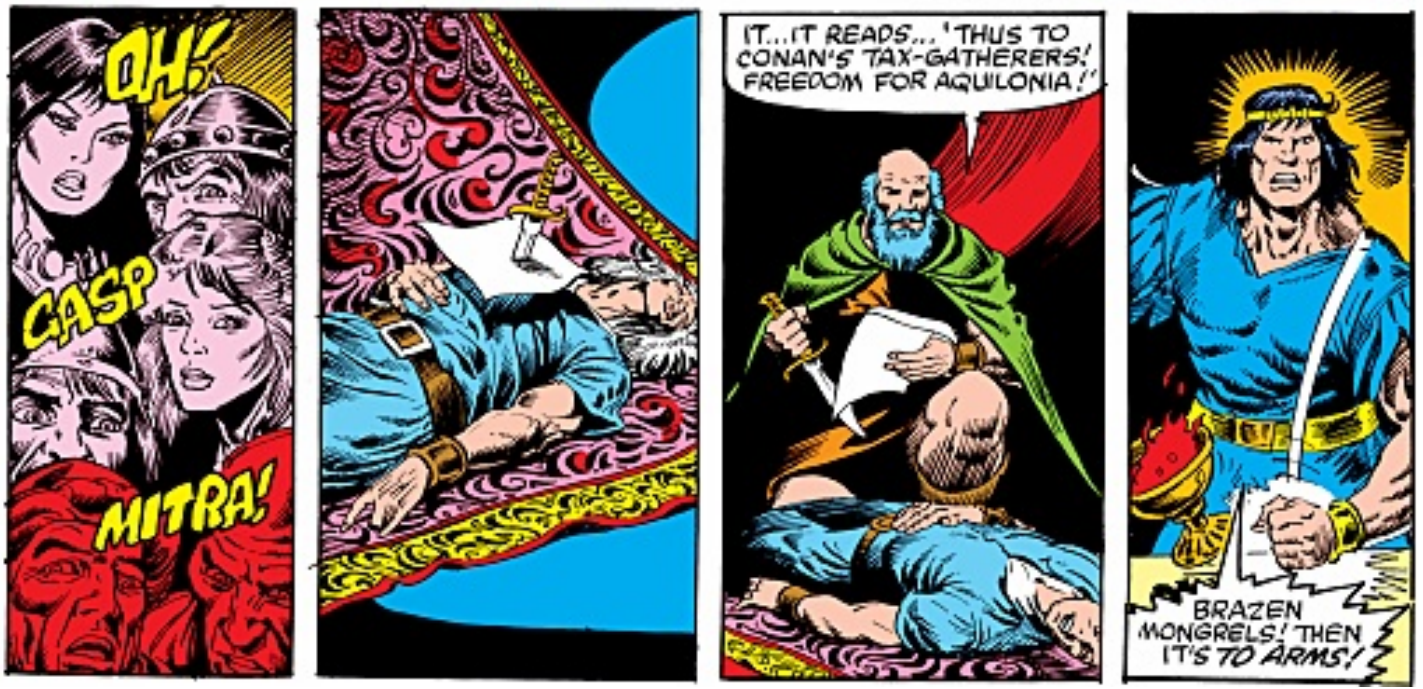
NOW BRING FORTH THE SACRIFICE.
YOU POSSESS NAUGHT TO GRANT THE SPIRIT OF AM-HOTEP. THUS, MUST YOU YIELD YOUR VERY LIFE'S BLOOD TO SATISFY THE KING.
BEND YOUR NECK TO THE FANG OF SET, STYGIAN.
NOW, PRINCE!
NO!
INTRUDERS! DEATH TO THOSE WHO DARE PROFANE THE HALLOWED ALTAR!
NEVER!
BRAAANG!
HASTEN FROM THIS HALL, BROTHERS, WHILE I INVOKE THE FATHER OF THE ELDER RACE TO PURGE THIS TEMPLE OF TRESPASS AND BLASPHEMY!
SET, THE BRAZIER OF ETERNITY BLAZES WITH THE BLOOD OF THY SERVANTS! AVENGE THIS DESECRATION!
HOLD STILL, OLD MAN, I'LL HAVE YOU FREE. THERE!
NO! I WOULD YIELD MY LIFE TO PRESERVE MY SOUL!


NOW, AM-HOTEP...
...WAKE!
HASHKEEM ME-GEHENAM!
RETURN FROM THE NETHER REGIONS...
...AND RISE!..
... IN VENGEANCE OF THE SLITHERING GOD!
NO, MAN, ARE YOU MAD?!
NOW I AM YOURS, GREAT KING!
OOPH!
AAARGH!
THUD
BACK, YOU SHAMBLING HORROR...
...BACK, OR THE SWORD OF CONN WILL HURL YOUR DRY BONES CLATTER-ING...

...ACROSS--OH!
THUK
CLANG!
OOMPH! NO!
CAN'T... BREATHE..
MITRA! WHERE--?
UNNH!
PRINCE CONN!
LET'S SEE HOW YOUR WITHERED GRAVES-CLOTHES TAKE TO...
FLAAM!
...FIRE, CORPSE!
SPAK
SPAK
THUMP
SPAK!
SPAK!
I BELIEVE THIS IS WHERE WE TAKE OUR EXIT, MY PRINCE!

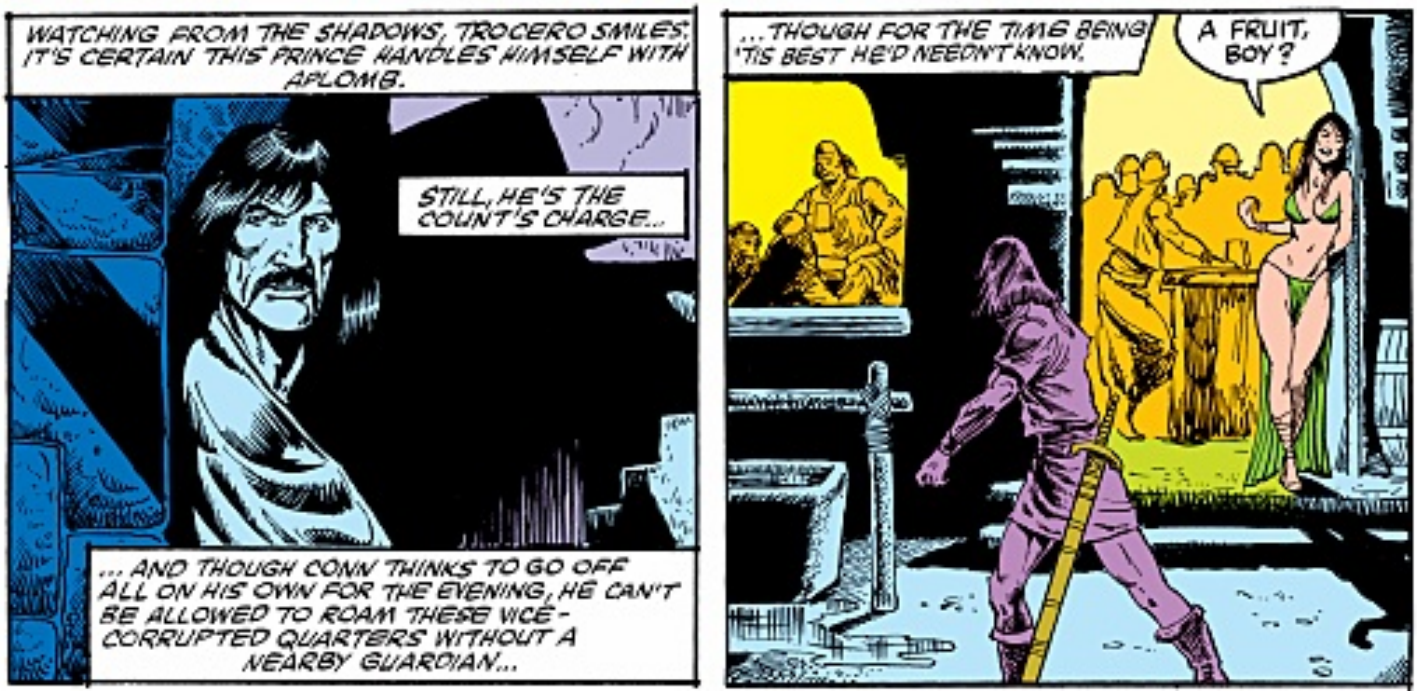
SEVERAL DAYS LATER, IN THE ROYAL PALACE OF TARANTIA...
AND NOW, KING CONAN, THE TRIBUTES OF THIS OCCASION--
SPEAK, PUBLIUS.

"...THE CITIZENS OF GALPARAN SING CONAN'S PRAISES AND PRESENT HIM WITH THIS LIFELIKE ELK FASHIONED ALL OF GOLD...
"...THE CITIZENS OF TANASUL SEND THREE MONKEYS IN A CAGE OF SOLID SILVER...
"...WHILE THOSE OF SHAMAR OFFER UP THE ANCIENT BROADSWORD OF THEIR ELDERS...
"...AND, LAST, THE CITIZENS OF TAHREM ABOVE THE SHIRKI RIVER PROFFER THIS EMBROIDERED CARPET OF IRANISTAN..."


OH!
GASP
MITRA!
IT...IT READS... 'THUS TO CONAN'S TAX-GATHERERS! FREEDOM FOR AQUILONIA!'
BRAZEN MONGRELS! THEN IT'S TO ARMS!

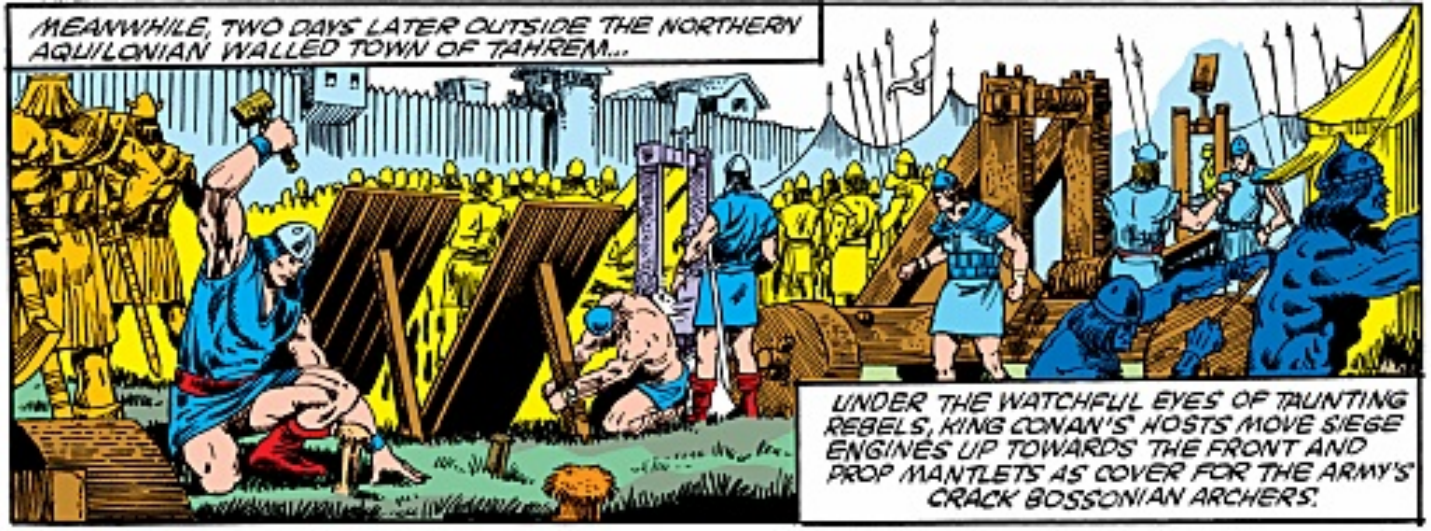
SEVERAL NIGHTFALLS LATER, PRINCE CONN WANDERS A STREET OF NOISY TAVERNS IN ZINGARA.
...FOR PIRATES AND THIEVES, GAMBLERS AND NE'ER-DO-WELLS FLOURISH WHERE THE RULER FAILS TO ENFORCE ANY LAW.
TROCERO HAS ALREADY TOLD HIM THAT THIS CITY IS RULED BY A PETTY PRINCELING, VERY MUCH ALIVE BUT A WITLESS FOOL WHOSE ENDLESS PARTYING IS APED IN THE ENDLESS DEBAUCHERY OF HIS SUBJECTS...

BUT THIS IS A LESSON THE PRINCE WOULD LEARN FOR HIMSELF.
HEY, GOAT-FACE-- WAZH THAT YER MOTHER I SEEN SHWIGGING ALE LIKE A REG'LAR BOOZER?!
I'D SAY IT'S PAST YOUR BEDTIME, SOT--
OOMPH!
--SO TAKE TO YOUR PILLOW!
SPLAAT!


WATCHING FROM THE SHADOWS, TROCERO SMILES: IT'S CERTAIN THIS PRINCE HANDLES HIMSELF WITH APLOMB.
STILL, HE'S THE COUNT'S CHARGE...
... AND THOUGH CONN THINKS TO GO OFF ALL ON HIS OWN FOR THE EVENING, HE CAN'T BE ALLOWED TO ROAM THESE VICE-CORRUPTED QUARTERS WITHOUT A NEARBY GUARDIAN...
...THOUGH FOR THE TIME BEING 'TIS BEST HE'D NEEDN'T KNOW.
A FRUIT, BOY?

HERE'S A JUICY APPLE TO BITE INTO.
I'M NO BOY!
GRRT
NOW WHERE'D YOU GO TO, WENCH?
HUZZAH
HUZZAH
HEY!
HEY!
DOUBLE MY WAGER!
HA!
HA!
ASIDE THERE, LET ME PASS!
I'LL SEE SOME BRUISES DOWN THERE!
GRRR
WHY, IT'S... IT'S...
HUZZAH!
CHANNG!
RRRIUP!
...IT'S... BARBARIC!

SO, YOU'RE NO BOY, EH? THEN DRINK UP LIKE A MAN!
MMM. SURELY MY MAN'S NOT TOO TIGHT-FISTED TO WAGER ON ONE OF THE FIGHTERS IN THE PIT?
GLUG GLUG
NO... I'VE GOT PLENTY IN... THIS PURSE... OH... HEAD SPINNING...
COME, THEN, TO MY PRIVATE CHAMBER...
WHERE I SHALL MIX KISSES WITH YOUR WINE.
HEY HEY
CLANG!
BUT SEVERAL MINUTES LATER, THE GIRL DEPARTS... ALONE.
BLOOD! BLOOD!
AND SOON, DISTURBED BY THE LENGTH OF THE YOUNG PRINCE'S STAY, TROCERO ENTERS.
IT'S TIME, HE BELIEVES, TO CALL THIS A NIGHT.
BUT CONN IS NOWHERE TO BE SEEN!
AND THEN...
OHH!
THAT'S SOME WELT RISING ON YOUR SCALP!
TROCERO, MY PURSE IS GONE!
A SCHEMING TAVERN MAID, EH? THERE'S A LESSON FOR YOU, LAD.
WE LEAVE THIS KINGDOM COME DAWN. THEN, FOR HERE MEN MAY STEAL WHILE THEIR RULER REVELS, AND NONE WILL REDRESS THE WRONG.


MEANWHILE, TWO DAYS LATER OUTSIDE THE NORTHERN AQUILONIAN WALLED TOWN OF TAHREM...
UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYES OF TAUNTING REBELS, KING CONAN'S HOSTS MOVE SIEGE ENGINES UP TOWARDS THE FRONT AND PROP MANTLETS AS COVER FOR THE ARMY'S CRACK BOSSONIAN ARCHERS.

THE ROYAL STANDARD--A GOLDEN LION ON A FIELD OF SABLE--FLUTTERS ON ITS STAFF IN THE MORNING WIND AND STRIKES PRIDE IN THE HEARTS OF THE MEN PRIVILEGED TO DEFEND IT.

THE GRIM KING HIMSELF IS STEELED TO CRUSH THIS NEST OF VIPERS ONCE AND FOR ALL. STILL--
HARK TO YOUR KING'S WORDS, CITIZENS OF TAHREM!

HA! WE FREE AQUILONIANS WILL NEVER ABIDE A BARBARIAN KING!
COME, WHAT WILL YOU DO, CIMMERIAN? SPILL MORE BLOOD OF AQUILONIA TO PRESERVE YOUR TYRANNY?

HHNN
FHWIT

WE'LL ANSWER YOUR SHAFTS IF NEED BE, TWENTY TO ONE-- BUT SURRENDER NOW AND YOU'LL BE GIVEN PASSAGE OUT OF THE COUNTRY.
YOU ALONE CAN PREVENT THE SPILLING OF AQUILONIAN BLOOD BY AQUILONIA'S OWN PROTECTORS!

YOU MISERABLE BARBARIAN! DARE YOU FASHION YOURSELF PROTECTOR OF A NATION YOU'VE TRAMPLED UNDER YOUR HEEL?!
THEN SEND YOUR WOMEN AND CHILDREN THROUGH THE GATES. THEY'LL BE SAFE IN TARANTIA UNTIL THE BATTLE'S DONE AND OVER WITH!
NEVER, DOG-KING!

I'D COUNSEL IMMEDIATE ASSAULT, MY LIEGE.
NO.

THERE'S LITTLE TO BE LOST IF WE ABIDE A DAY OR TWO.
CROM KNOWS IT'S A HEADY FEELING TO BE OUTSIDE THE STUFFY PALACE WALLS ONCE IN AWHILE ANYWAYS.

AND THOUGH I'M THE FIRST WHO'D ROAST THESE REBEL HIDES ON AN OPEN PIT,...
... STILL THERE MAY BE THOSE INSIDE WHO ARE CAPTIVES OF THEIR OWN TOWNSFOLK AS PRINCE CONN SUGGESTED.
LET'S SEE IF WE CAN'T SPARE SOME INNOCENT LIVES BEFORE WE GO IN.
I'D PREFER MEN NOT BRUIT THAT CONAN THE KING IS OVER-ZEALOUS TO SHED HIS OWN SUBJECTS' BLOOD

ELSEWHERE, THAT EVENING...
WELL THEN, I'VE SEEN STYGIA'S FOLK IN THE GRIP OF A DARK AND POWERFUL PRIESTHOOD, AND I'LL NOT SOON FORGET ZINGARA'S LAWLESS RABBLE.
BUT MAYHAP HERE IN ZAMORA WE'LL FIND A PEOPLE WELL-CARED FOR BY ITS GOVERNMENT.
MITRA, YOU'LL FIND NO SUCH THING!
FOR ALL HERE LIVE IN FEAR OF MALAKON, A DESPOT AND A TYRANT.
LOOK AROUND AT THESE DESERTED STREETS, MY PRINCE--
--LIKE EVERY TYRANT, MALAKON FEARS HIS RUTHLESS REIGN WILL END WITH AN ASSASSIN'S DIRK.
EVERY MAN IS THUS SUSPECT AS AN ENEMY, AND ALL MUST REPAIR TO THEIR HOMES SOON AS THE DAY'S WORK IS ENDED.
IN THIS WAY MALAKON HOPES TO PREVENT CONSPIRACIES AGAINST THE CROWN.
THE CRIMINALS, OF COURSE ENJOY THE FREEDOM OF THEIR OWN DENS AND RATHOLES, BUT THE DECENT FOLK MUST ABIDE BY A DUSK CURFEW...
...OR RISK ARREST BY THE DREADED ROYAL GUARD.
KNOK KNOK
WHAT IS IT?
A NIGHT'S LODGING AND A SQUARE MEAL FOR TWO, GOOD SIR.
BEGONE! 'TIS SUICIDE TO LODGE STRANGERS HERE!
CLACK!

WELL, THAT CERTAINLY UNDERSCORES WHAT I'VE BEEN SAY-- WHAT?!
HO! WHAT VERMIN HAVE WE HERE WHO BREACH THE ROYAL CURFEW?!
I'LL ANSWER THAT INSOLENCE WITH COLD STEEL--
DISCRETION BEFORE VALOR, PRINCE. I BELIEVE...
"... WE'RE HANDILY OUTNUMBERED."
SO, CONAN SENDS HIS MANGY CUB TO SPY ME OUT, EH?
MY FATHER WOULD SOONER SPY ON NURSE-MAIDS THAN ON YOU, MALAKON, A PETTY TYRANT WHO SMOTHERS FREEDOM!
QUITE TO THE CONTRARY, BARBARIAN PUP! YOUR WRETCHED FATHER SETS POOR EXAMPLE FOR THIS REGION, ACCORDING HIS SUBJECTS EXCESSIVE FREEDOM. BY THE SPIDER-GOD OF YEZUD, OUR OWN CITIZENS WOULD SOON BE CLAMORING FOR THE SAME!
BUT I HAVE DISPATCHED MEN OF ZAMORA TO MASQUERADE AS AQUILONIAN REBELS AND DESTABILIZE CONAN'S RULE.
EVEN AS WE SPEAK, MY HAND-PICKED AGENTS HAVE SEIZED YOUR TOWN OF TAHREM IN THE GUISE OF A CIVIL UPRISING.

BUT COME, COME, I PLAY AN UNGRACIOUS HOST. SURELY YOU ARE EAGER TO VISIT THE FABLED DUNGEONS OF ZAMORA.
SHORTLY...
TWO PIGS TO BE PENNED, EH? OINK OINK. HEE-HEE!
SURE IT'S NO SHADIZAR, BUT I TRUST YE'LL FIND THE ACCOMMO-DATIONS TO YER LIKINGS. HAH!
NOW-- BLAST YER EYES! WHERE'S MY KEYS TO THE WALL MANACLES?
BAH! THE KING'LL HAVE ME SKINNED IF I LEFT THEM BEHIND AGAIN!
YE TWO BE STAYIN' PUT 'TIL I RETURN!
GO TO THE DEVIL, YOU TUB OF LARD!
HWIP!
WELL, I NEVER-- A TALKING PIG?! HEE-HEE!
HERE-- HAVE A LIGHT TO LOOK AROUN'...
...AN' SEE WHAT AWAITS YE...

HNNEIGH!
...LESS OF COURSE, WE FEED FEED YE TO THE HORSES FIRST! HA!

CLANK!

SPRING TO MY BACK, PRINCE, AND TRY TO REACH THE SCONCE TO SINGE YOUR BONDS!

BUT MY WEIGHT, TROCERO--
--WILL DO LESS HARM THAN A ZAMORAN RACK, I ASSURE YOU.

OH!
THUNK
IT SEEMS I'VE GOTTEN ON IN YEARS. NEVER MIND. AGAIN, BOY!

ARE YOU READY?

AYE!

THERE'S A LAD!

I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN REACH--
I'VE GOT IT, TROCERO!
FFTT!
FFTT
FFT!
SPAK!
TROCERO, I CAN'T--
TROCERO, I'M FREE!
YOU'LL PUT OINTMENT ON THOSE BURNS SOON AS WE'RE IN SAFETY!
IT CAN WAIT! THERE, YOU'RE UNTIED!
NOW, WHICH ONE OF YE WILL KISS ME BARBED WHIP FIST--?!
YOU CAN KISS THE FLOOR, SCUM!
URMPH!
I'VE THE KEYS!

UP THOSE STAIRS-- THAT'S WHERE THE SOUND OF HORSES IS COMING FROM.
HNNHN!
AYE, IT'S A STABLE ALRIGHT, AND OUT OF DOORS. IF YOUR FATHER WERE HERE HE'D SPLINTER THESE PORTALS WITH HIS SHOULDERS.
ONE OF THESE MUST FIT...
FOOTSTEPS, TROCERO!
TAP TAP TAP
MITRA CONFOUND THESE KEYS!
TAPATAP TAPATAP TAPATAP TAPATAP
CHRT CHRT
THERE THEY ARE! SEIZE THEM OR THE KING WILL HANG US TO THE RAVENS!
ONLY TWO? THERE'S ODDS WE CAN LIVE WITH. I'LL HOLD THESE SEWER RATS AT BAY...
HWIP!
...WHILE YOU SEEK--

-- THE RIGHT KEY!
CLIK
HNNNHN!
YOU'LL TENDER OUR APOLOGIES TO MALAKON...
HWIIP!
... AND TELL THE TYRANT THAT MORE URGENT MATTERS TOOK US TO TAHREM!
MOAAN!
SINCE PRINCE CONN AND TROCERO HAVE FLED ZAMORA, DAWN HAS RISEN TWICE OVER TAHREM.
... AND AN AIR OF RAW IMPATIENCE PERVADES CONAN'S LEGIONS, AS SQUADRON AFTER SQUADRON SWINGS INTO PLACE -- SERRIED RANKS OF PIKEMAN AND MOUNTED KNIGHTS IN GLEAMING ARMOR, AND AT THEIR HEAD THE FAMED BOSSONIAN ARCHERS FROM THE WESTERN MARCHES, FINEST BOWMEN OF THEIR AGE --

CROM'S BLOOD! I'VE NO MORE TIME TO WASTE! IF THAT'S THE FINAL ANSWER OF THOSE JACKALS, THEN SOUND THE TRUMPETS!
BA-RUM
BAA-RUMM!
GOLD TALENTS FOR EVERY REBEL HEAD THAT ROLLS!
NOW, ARCHERS BLOT OUT THE SUN WITH YOUR SHAFTS!
FIRE!
KA-RUNG!
AND THE MANGONELS KICK UP THEIR REARS LIKE BUCKING NAGS AS THEY FLING THEIR HUGE STONE CATAPULTS OVER THE STOCKADE WALLS.

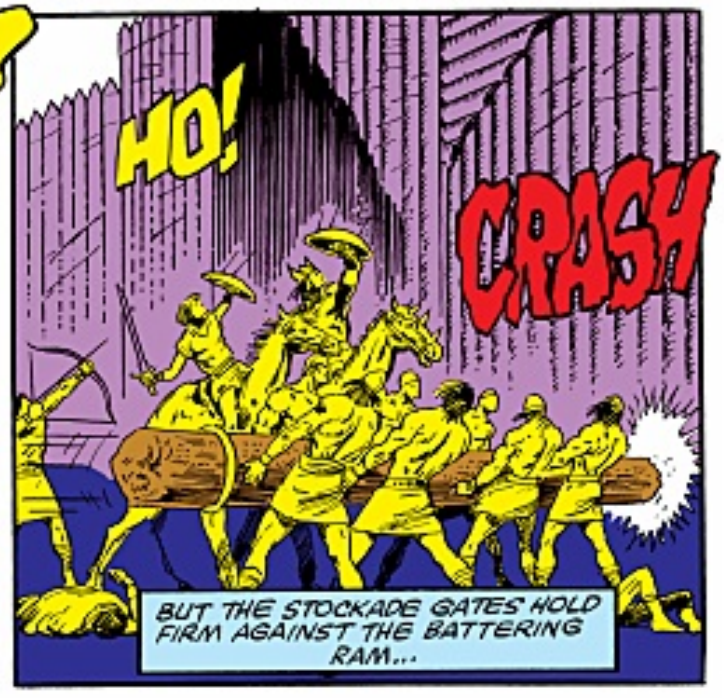
BUT THE REBELS ARE NOT DEFENSELESS...

THEN...
FATHER! FATHER!

CONN!
FATHER, THE REBELS ARE INFILTRATORS FROM ZAMORA WHO HOLD THIS TOWN HOSTAGE--
A PLOY OF ZAMORA'S TYRANT, MY LIEGE!
LET ME FIGHT BY YOUR SIDE, FATHER!

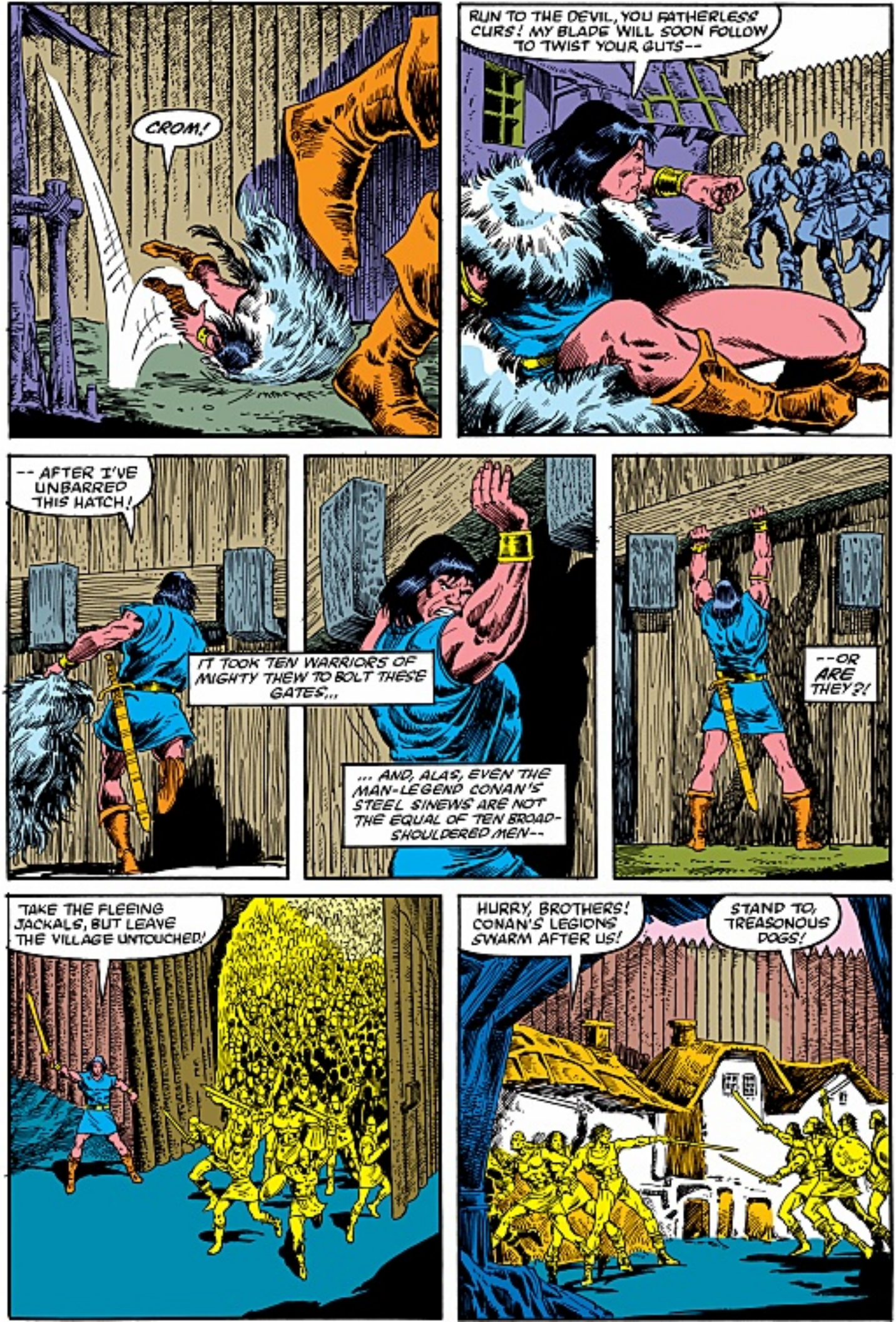
MOTHER OF MITRA! MY PRIDE NEAR BURSTS MY HAUBERK, LAD. BUT COME, THERE'S A BATTLE TO BE WON--
--AND ZAMORAN SCOUNDRELS TO BE CARVED LIKE GEESE!

HEAVE, AQUILONIANS!


HO!
CRASH
BUT THE STOCKADE GATES HOLD FIRM AGAINST THE BATTERING RAM...

...WHILE BEHIND THOSE GATES...
HEAR ME, BROTHERS! I'M OFF TO CLEAR OUR ESCAPE. WAIT FOR THE ALARUM TO ABANDON THE BATTLEMENTS!
BE READY TO FLEE THE TUNNELS UNDERGROUND!
WHEN THE AQUILONIANS BURST THROUGH IT'S CERTAIN THEN THAT IN THEIR FURY THEY'LL SLAUGHTER THE TOWNSFOLK WE'VE HELD HOSTAGE!
THIS MOLTEN LEAD WILL COOL YOUR TEMPERS, SWINE OF CONAN!
PPLLAASH!
AAIIEEE! AAIIEE!
THERE'S THE SIGNAL TO LEAVE OUR POSTS!
THEY'VE LEFT THE BATTLEMENTS, CONN!
THOSE ZAMORAN DOGS WILL BE LOST TO US, I TELL YOU, UNLESS WE PUSH THROUGH THIS VERY MOMENT!
CAN WE SCALE--

NO TIME FOR THAT!
YOU'LL LEAD THE CHARGE, LAD!
NOW BREAK TIME'S NECK, AQUILONIANS! GET ON WITH IT!
THIS CLOAK OF FUR WILL CUSHION THE FALL!
REMEMBER, MEN, WE WANT THE INFILTRATORS -- SPARE ALL ELSE!
HO! LET'S FEEL THIS WILD ONAGER KICK!
SBRANG
LIKE A ROYAL EAGLE, CONAN SOARS...
... A CATAPULT OF CORDED MUSCLE AND IRON NERVE OVER THE STOCKADE WALLS!


CROM!
RUN TO THE DEVIL, YOU FATHERLESS CURS! MY BLADE WILL SOON FOLLOW TO TWIST YOUR GUTS--
-- AFTER I'VE UNBARRED THIS HATCH!
IT TOOK TEN WARRIORS OF MIGHTY THEW TO BOLT THESE GATES...
... AND, ALAS, EVEN THE MAN-LEGEND CONAN'S STEEL SINEWS ARE NOT THE EQUAL OF TEN BROAD-SHOULDERED MEN--
--OR ARE THEY?!
TAKE THE FLEEING JACKALS, BUT LEAVE THE VILLAGE UNTOUCHED!
HURRY, BROTHERS! CONAN'S LEGIONS SWARM AFTER US!
STAND TO, TREASONOUS DOGS!

NO! NO! HOLD! WE... WE YIELD...

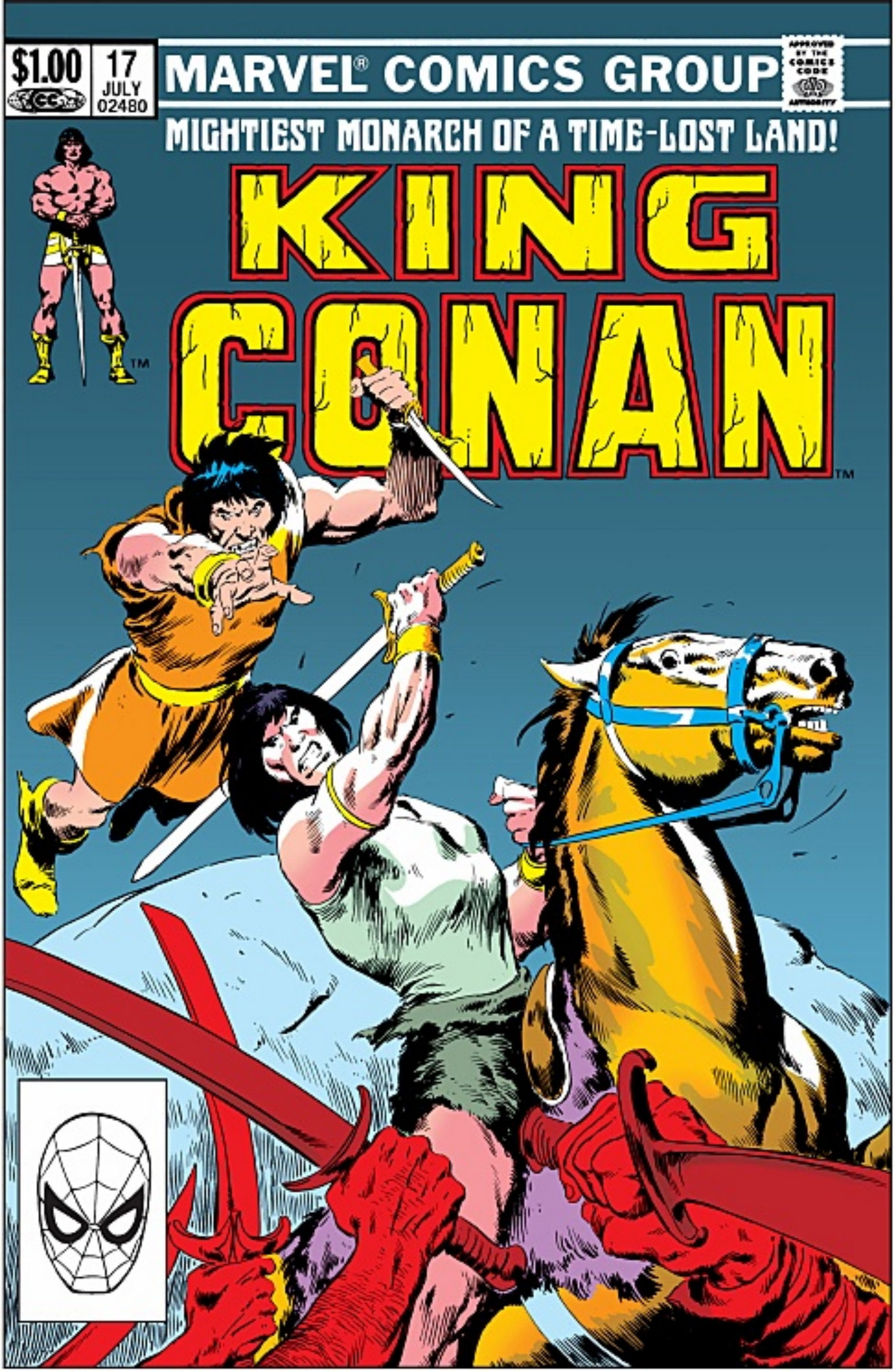
'TIS THE KING, CONAN HIMSELF-- I KNOW THAT MOUNTAINOUS FRAME! AND WITH HIM OUR SOLDIERY!
WE'RE SAVED!

WE'RE SAVED!
MITRA BLESS YOU, KING CONAN!
PRAISE TO THE KING!

WELL, CAPTAIN NEOLIDES, WE'VE TAKEN THIS TOWN WITHOUT THE NEED FOR EVEN ONE SPUTTERING TORCH! HA!
AGREED, YOUR MAJESTY, AND BROKEN THE BACK OF ZAMORA'S CRAVEN SCHEMING!

AND SOON...
AYE, FATHER, WITH ALL HER FAULTS AQUILONIA STILL GRANTS HER CITIZENS FREEDOM TO ENJOY THEIR OWN EARNINGS, TO SPEAK WITHOUT FEAR, AND TO LIVE BY JUST LAWS.

I SUPPOSE THAT IS THE BEST ONE CAN EXPECT FROM FALLIBLE HUMANKIND.
PERHAPS, CONN.
THOUGH THERE'S NO TRUE MONARCH WORTH HIS THRONE THAT WON'T REACH FOR MITRA'S VERY HEAVENS TO BRING PEACE AND PROSPERITY TO HIS OWN REALM.
SO, I SEE YOU'VE GAINED MUCH FROM YOUR JOURNEY, SON.
INDEED, MY LORD, AND HE'S LEARNED MORE THAN THAT--
-- FOR EXAMPLE, TO DISTRUST A PRETTY MAID WHO PUTS HER TANKARD TO YOUR LIPS... AND HER EYES TO YOUR PURSE!
HA HA! NO NEED TO BLUSH, BOY! THERE'S A LESSON YOUR FATHER HAD TO LEARN ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION!
LIKE FATHER LIKE SON, EH TROCERO?!
END



COVER PENCILER & INKER: JOHN BUSCEMA

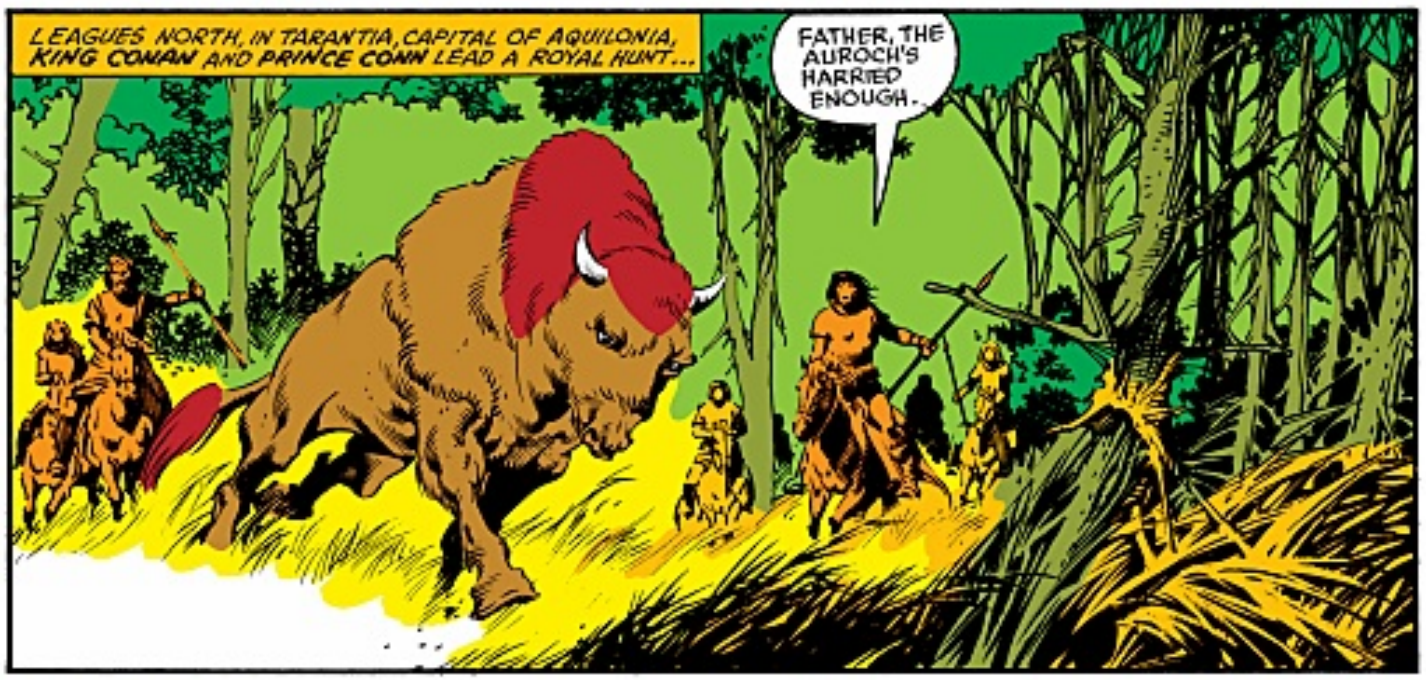
A TYRANT IN AMBER

ALAN ZELENETZ SCRIPTER | JOHN BUSCEMA PENCILER | RUDY NEBRES INKER | JOE ROSEN LETTERER | GEORGE ROUSSOS COLORIST | JIM OWSLEY EDITOR | JIM SHOOTER IN CHIEF

SAY SOMETHING OR THEY'LL HANG US FOR DISRESPECT...
LONG LIVE THE KING.
AND THEN--
DEATH TO ALL TYRANTS!
DIE, NEBUHAN!
WHAT!? MY BLADE SANK TO ITS HILT BUT DREW NO BLOOD!
YOU TREACHEROUS DOG!
NO, HOLD YOUR PIKE!
RATHER TRAMPLE HIM ALIVE.
HNNNH!
AIEE

IT'S... IT'S IMPOSSIBLE.
THE KING MUST INDEED LEAD A DEMON'S BEWITCHED LIFE!
ISHTAR, WILL THIS TYRANT LIVE FOREVER?

GUARDS, LIFT THE BODY OF THE WOULD-BE-ASSASSIN. OUR CROCODILE WILL ENJOY HIM. NOW MOVE ON.


LEAGUES NORTH, IN TARANTIA, CAPITAL OF AQUILONIA, KING CONAN AND PRINCE CONN LEAD A ROYAL HUNT...
FATHER, THE AUROCH'S HARRIED ENOUGH.

LOOK, WE'VE BACKED HIM AGAINST A COPSE OF TREES. I'LL TAKE HIM--
WHOA, CONN--

I CAN DO IT, FATHER. I'LL STRIKE THE DEATHBLOW--

CONN, YOU IMPETUOUS WHELP, WAIT FOR THE REST OF US TO CLOSE IN!
THERE!
OH! I'VE ONLY WOUNDED HIM--
TATHUP TATHUP TATHUP
HE'S MAD --NO!
I'M COMING, BOY!
TATHUD
BY CROM, WHAT--?
THERE'S AN ARROW DIRECTLY TO THE HEART, FATHER! BUT WHO--?
WHO INDEED, PRINCELING...?
I AM AYELET. MY FOLLOWERS HAVE CALLED ME SHE-LION AND QUEEN OF THE DESERT.

BUT NOW, AFTER TWENTY SUMMERS, I HAVE LEFT THOSE FOLLOWERS UPON THE SANDS ABOVE ZAMBOULA.
FOR IT IS PROPHESIED THAT WITHIN THE NEW MOON I AM TO ASCEND THE THRONE OF TEL-AMMON IN SHEM, THERE TO REIGN AS TRUE QUEEN AND HEIR TO THE CROWN OF ATALA.
I AM CONAN.

AND SOON, A DINNER OF ROAST AUROCH IS TENDERED IN HONOR OF THE YOUNG WOMAN WARRIOR WHO HAS SAVED THE LIFE OF AQUILONIA'S CROWN PRINCE...
THERE, ZENOBIA, MY QUEEN -- THE ANIMAL AYELET SLEW AT FORTY YARDS OR BETTER!
ONE SHAFT -- FHWIT! -- LIKE THAT AND FEATHERED ITS HEART! THE BEST OF MY BOSSONIAN ARCHERS WOULD BE LYING TO BOAST SUCH A SHOT!

I ADD MY WARMEST THANKS TO THOSE OF MY HUSBAND FOR YOUR PROTECTION AND DELIVERANCE OF OUR SON.
IT WOULD BE A GRAVE SHAME IF AUGHT HARM BEFELL SO HANDSOME A YOUNG MAN.

NOW, AYELET, YOU SAID ON OUR RETURN TO THE PALACE THAT YOU SOUGHT THE AID OF AQUILONIA?
NOT AQUILONIA, CONAN, ONLY ITS KING.

PRINCESS AYELET, IF MY HOARY HEAD EARNS ME RESPECT, PERMIT ME TO RECITE THE TALE OF WOE.
SPEAK, NESHRAH.
SOME TWENTY WINTERS GONE, MY HAIR ALREADY GRIZZLED AS THE WOLF'S SKIN, I WAS MAID TO QUEEN ATALA, THE PRIDE AND BEAUTY OF THE SHEMITE CITY-STATE OF TEL-AMMON.
"THE QUEEN WAS WOOED BY NEBUHAN OF NOBLE FAMILY, WHO WON HER WITH THE STORY OF HIS LIFE--
"--HIS GALLANT BATTLES, HAIRBREADTH ESCAPES, AND TRAVEL IN EXOTIC LANDS.
"SHE LOVED HIM WELL, BUT NEBUHAN'S OWN LOVE WAS PAINTED DECEIT. IT WAS THE THRONE ALONE HE COVETED--
"--THE ROYAL CONSORT WOULD BE KING.
"THUS, WHEN A WHITE-HAIRED WITCH OF VANAHEIM--THE LAND OF ICE AND SNOW--VISITED THE COURT...
"...AND OFFERED SECRETLY TO BARTER SORCERY FOR TREASURE...
'TIS AMBER, NORTHERN GOLD, AND WITH A SPELL I CAN ENSORCEL YOUR SOUL THEREIN. SO LONG AS IT REMAINS THEREIN, YOUR FLESH WILL BE INVULNERABLE TO HARM.
"...NEBUHAN AGREED. BUT HE BARGAINED TREACHEROUSLY--
NOW THAT MY BODY'S CHARMED, I'LL LEAVE NO CHANCE YOU'LL BETRAY ME, SORCERESS!
"SOON AFTER, QUEEN ATALA TOOK TO BED IN CHILDBIRTH.
"THOUGH I WAS MID-WIFE, WICKED NEBUHAN ORDERED ME FROM HER CHAMBER...
"...BUT, MY EAR TO THE DOOR, I LISTENED, TREMBLING, AS HE TOLD ATALA OF HIS ENCHANTED SOUL...
"...THEN--ISHTAR GIVE ME STRENGTH--I HEARD THE CRIES OF TERROR AS HE SLEW THE BEAUTEOUS QUEEN AND HER NEW INFANT!

"HE THEN SPREAD WORD THAT MOTHER AND SON HAD DIED IN CHILDBIRTH.

"HE DID NOT KNOW THAT MOMENTS BEFORE HE ENTERED I HAD ALREADY DELIVERED THE QUEEN OF A BABY GIRL, TWIN TO THE MAN-CHILD NEBUHAN WAS TO SLAY.

"NOR WOULD HE EVER KNOW...

"...FOR I FLED WITH THE CHILD TO THE PRIEST OF ISHTAR...

"...WHO GAZED INTO THE *FIRES OF FORETELLING*--

SPEAK *NOTHING* OF THIS, WOMAN.

UNTIL THE MEADOWLANDS OF *SHEM* HAVE FLOURISHED TWENTY SPRINGS AND ONE, THE INFANT PRINCESS MUST YIELD HER RIGHTFUL THRONE.

THEN WILL THE GODDESS *ISHTAR* RISE AT HER RIGHT ARM.

THUS THE SACRED PROPHECY.

"THE CHILD AND I FOUND REFUGE IN THE SANDS OF ZAMBOULA AMONG NOMADS WHOSE CHIEFTAIN ONCE HAD BEEN MY KIN.

"AND AS AYELET GREW, ALL AVOWED HER NATURAL MAJESTY, HER EXPERTISE WITH TULWAR AND WITH BOW, WHICH SURPASSED EVEN THE BRASHEST OF MY KINSMEN.

"THEY NAMED HER QUEEN AND, LIKE THE DESERT SHE-LION, AYELET LED THEM ON MANY A PROSPEROUS HUNT, AWAITING THE DAY OF PROPHECY."

THAT DAY, CONAN, DRAWS NIGH.

DO YOU READ THE SHEMITE TONGUE?

AYE.

"I YERAHMAEL HIGH PRIEST INSCRIBE THESE HOLY WORDS-- IN THE TWENTY-FIRST YEAR OF BLOOD, ON THE DAY OF ANNIVERSARY...
...THE MORNING-STAR WILL RISE AT MIDNIGHT, THE LIONESS WILL CONQUER TEL-AMMON."
WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

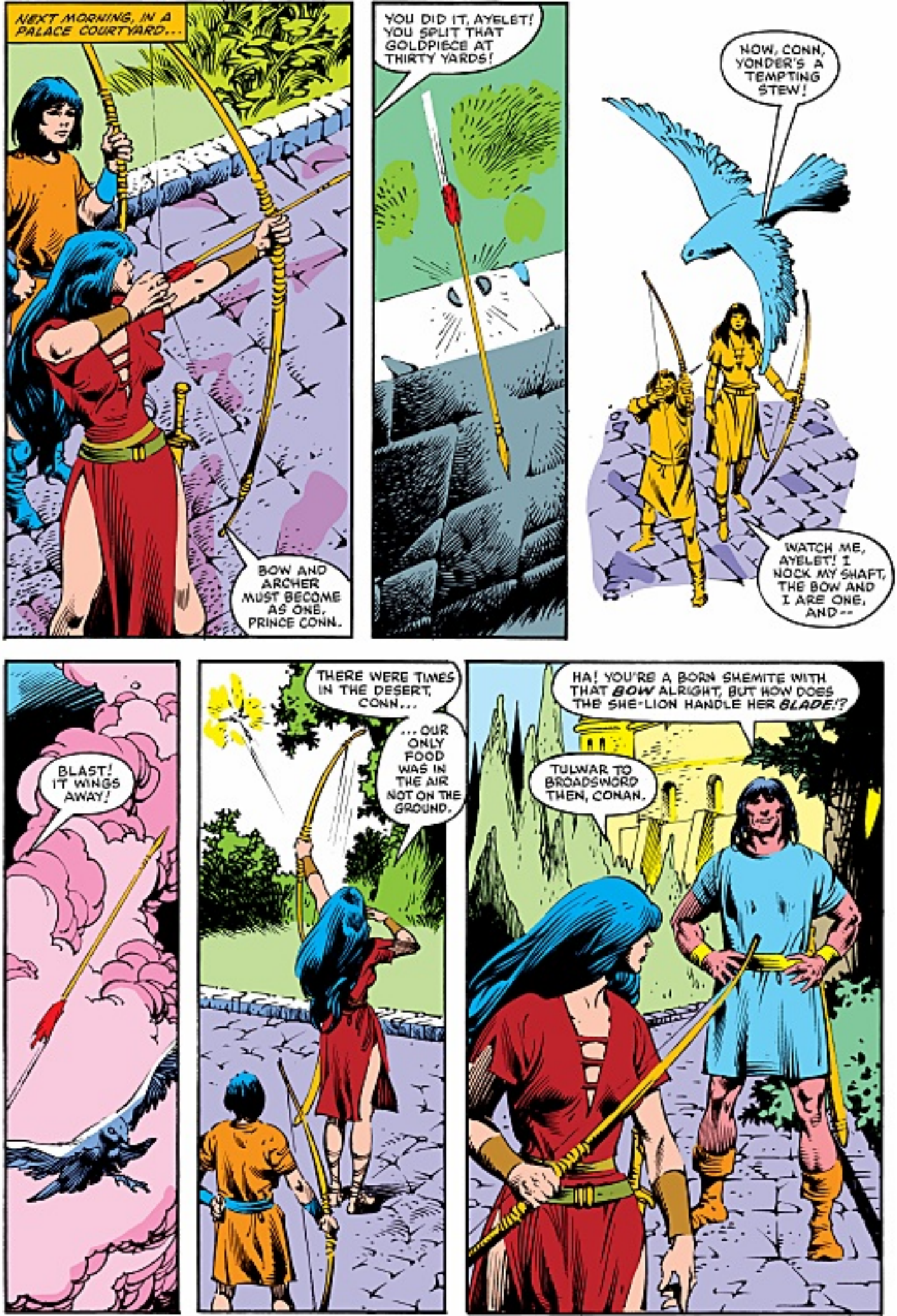
MY NAME, AYELET, SIGNIFIES 'THE MORNING STAR.' AND LIKE MY MOTHER I BEAR THE BIRTHMARK OF THE LIONESS UPON MY ARM.

AND WHAT WOULD YOU OF MY HUSBAND?
THE ENCHANTED AMBER WHICH HOLDS THE TYRANT'S SOUL IS HIDDEN IN A TOPLESS TOWER OF NEBUHAN'S OWN DESIGN, THE TOWER OF BET-SHAID.
THE AMBER MUST BE GOTTEN AND CAST INTO FIRE, ONLY THEN MAY THE DEATHS OF MY MOTHER AND BROTHER BE AVENGED AND MY PEOPLE BE FREED OF HIS TYRANNY.

WHEREVER I HAVE TRAVELED, MEN SPEAK THE NAME OF CONAN. IF THERE IS ANY WHO CAN SCALE BET-SHAID AND STEAL THE TYRANT'S SOUL IT IS YOUR HUSBAND.

FOR HIS AID, AQUILONIA WILL HAVE AN EVERLASTING ALLY IN THE HEART OF SHEM.
PERHAPS, PRINCESS, WE COULD SEND TROOPS, BUT AS FOR THE KING HIMSELF, ONCE MORE TO LEAVE HIS LAND--

AS FOR THE KING, HE'LL MAKE REPLY WITHIN THE NEXT FEW DAYS.
PRINCESS, YOU ARE WELCOME TO RESIDE WITHIN THE ROYAL PALACE 'TIL THAT TIME.
IT DOES ME HONOR TO ACCEPT YOUR HOSPITALITY.


NEXT MORNING, IN A PALACE COURTYARD...
BOW AND ARCHER MUST BECOME AS ONE, PRINCE CONN.
YOU DID IT, AYELET! YOU SPLIT THAT GOLDPIECE AT THIRTY YARDS!
NOW, CONN, YONDER'S A TEMPTING STEW!
WATCH ME, AYELET! I NOCK MY SHAFT, THE BOW AND I ARE ONE, AND--
BLAST! IT WINGS AWAY!
THERE WERE TIMES IN THE DESERT, CONN...
...OUR ONLY FOOD WAS IN THE AIR NOT ON THE GROUND.
HA! YOU'RE A BORN SHEMITE WITH THAT BOW ALRIGHT, BUT HOW DOES THE SHE-LION HANDLE HER BLADE!?
TULWAR TO BROADSWORD THEN, CONAN.

BUT, FATHER--
NOT NOW, BOY. CAN'T YOU SEE THIS IS SERIOUS BUSINESS?

THAK

HO, YOU THRUST AND PARRY DEFTLY, PRINCESS.
THAK
A QUEEN OUGHT NOT RELY UPON THE ROYAL GUARD FOR HER SOLE DEFENSE.

WHY SO DOWNCAST, CONN? WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?
THE COURTYARD, MOTHER. NOW, GOOD DAY.

HA HA
YOU'VE NEAR WINDED ME, AYELET!

AND THAT EVENING, THE ROYAL GARDENS...
YOU'LL NOT GO WITH HER, CONAN, WILL YOU? LEAVE US AGAIN?
I MAY HAVE BEEN BORN A BARBARIAN OF CIMMERIA, ZENOBIA, BUT-- CROM!--
YOU'VE CIVILIZED ME ENOUGH TO READ THE NUANCE IN YOUR VOICE. YOU'RE JEALOUS, MY LOVE.

YOU RIDE FROM AQUILONIA SO OFTEN THE PEOPLE WILL BEGIN TO GRUMBLE THAT YOU CARE LEAST FOR YOUR OWN SUBJECTS.
AYELET CAN GET OTHERS WHO WILL ATTEMPT THE TOWER--
ZENOBIA, IN MY YOUTH THERE WAS NO HEIGHT I COULD NOT SCALE. I REMEMBER THE TOWER OF THE ELEPHANT--
--LIKE GLASS ITS POLISHED SIDES. CROM! DO YOU THINK I CAN STILL DO IT?

AYELET'S RIGHT. EVERYWHERE MEN SPEAK OF CONAN'S PROWESS. WELL, I'LL ADD ANOTHER DEED TO THEIR STORE OF LEGENDS!

LET THEM SEE CIVILIZATION'S NOT SOFTENED THE OLD BOY FROM CIMMERIA. THE KINGDOM'S AT PEACE--
YES, CONAN. THE KINGDOM IS AT PEACE.

BUT IS IT SO DIFFICULT FOR *YOU* TO BE AT PEACE AS WELL? OR MUST THE SAVAGE EVER RISE IN YOUR BREAST TO TAKE YOU WANDERING FROM ME?

THAT NEXT DAY...
AYELET, I'VE ORDERED WHITE TEMPEST TO BE SADDLED.
THEN YOU'LL COME! WE'LL LEAVE AT ONCE. MY THANKS, CONAN.
AND WHEN THE MOON'S ONCE MORE FULL, LION AND LIONESS WILL PROWL THE PALACE OF TEL-AMMON, EH?
SOON...
FAREWELL, MY LOVE, AND HASTEN BACK.
STILL, I DON'T SEE WHY I CANNOT COME TO AID AYELET AS WELL, SIRE!
AND LEAVE YOUR MOTHER WITHOUT HER RIGHT SWORD ARM? NO, SON, I VOUCH YOU'LL NOT BE IDLE HERE AT HOME.
YOUR KING WILL RETURN SOON, ZENOBIA. I PROMISE YOU THAT.
MITRA HAS ALWAYS BEEN KIND TO HIM, AYELET, I TRUST ISHTAR WILL AS WELL.
SHE IS INDEED A QUEENLY BEAUTY, IS SHE NOT, MOTHER?
YES, SON. AND YOU ARE AGAIN MAN OF THE PALACE WHILE YOUR FATHER RELIVES HIS YOUTH.

TEL-AMMON...
LET THE RABBLE PRATTLE THEIR RUMORS AS THEY ALWAYS HAVE, BUT FEAR NOT, MY IVORY-LIMBED BEAUTIES.
NO SUPERSTITIOUS PROPHECIES CAN BETRAY YOUR KING.
IN LESS THAN ONE MONTH'S TIME, WE CELEBRATE THRICE SEVEN YEARS MY REIGN, AND ALL SHEM WILL ECHO WITH THE RIOT OF OUR REVELRY.

WE AWAIT ONLY YOUR MAJESTY'S WORD.

DISPATCH THE WRETCHES, SO NEBUHAN COMMANDS!
GADUP
GADUP

FOR THE LOVE OF ISHTAR, HAVE YOU NO MERCY IN YOUR VILLAINOUS BLACK SOUL, NEBUHAN!?

HAVE A MUZZLE TO SILENCE YOUR YAPPING, DOG!

UNNH
CHUK
CHUK

MENASHAM, FEED SEVERAL OF THESE EXECUTED TO OUR CROCODILE, AND HANG THE REST IN SHULAMIT MARKET SQUARE.
WE CAN BE CERTAIN NONE ELSE SHALL EVADE THIS WEEK'S TAXES.

SEVERAL DAYS LATER, ON ROUTE TO SHEM...
THUS NEBUHAN'S PAID HYRKANIAN GUARDS ALONE ARE LOYAL--IF MERCENARIES CAN EVER BE CALLED SO.
ALL ELSE CHAFE UNDER HIS YOKE, BUT LIVE IN FEAR OF HIS CHARMED LIFE.
BUT THEY'VE HEARD RUMOR OF THE PROPHECY--PERHAPS THE GODDESS ISHTAR WHISPERS IT FOR HOPE--THOUGH NONE KNOWS THERE BREATHES A TRUE HEIR TO ATALA'S THRONE.

THOUGH ALL WILL HAIL AND JOIN US ONCE WE'VE SLAIN MY CRUEL FATHER. CONAN, WHO--!?
WELL, WELL, TWO STINKING GADABOUTS WHAT HAVEN'T PAID THE BORDER TAX!
BACK TO YOUR KENNELS, YOU MIS-BEGOTTEN CURS!
OR I'LL CARVE YOUR SOULS A PASSAGE TO HADES RIGHT THROUGH YOUR GUTS!
DOES YOU REFUSE TO PAY, THEN!?
AYE, NOR WILL WE BROOK DELAY FROM LOUTISH HIGHWAYMEN!

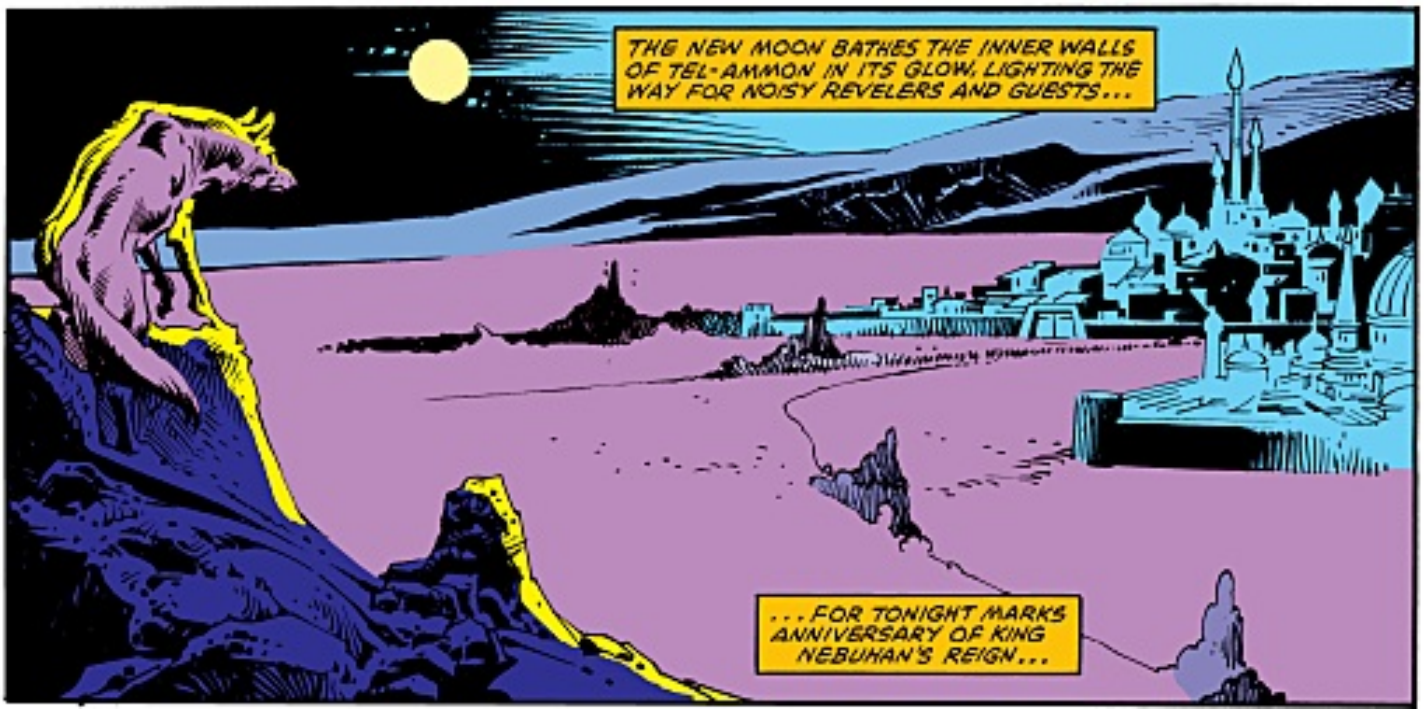
YOU HEARD HER-- WE'VE NO MORE TIME TO WASTE! NOW OUT OF OUR WAY, SCUM!
KICK
SLUSH!
WHO DOES YOU THINK Y'ARE, LOUD-MOUTHED SHE-DOG!?
SKAAG
GLAARGH
'TIS SHE-LION, MISCREANT!
WHERE DOES YOU RUN, WORTHLESS TRAITOR!? STAND TO AND FIGHT!
AND FORFEIT ME HIDE TO THEM TWO DEVILS? MITRA, NEVER!

SO-- BACK, YOU WHITE-LIVERED EXCUSE FOR A THIEF!
NOW, SINCE YOU'VE THE SMELL OF A MOUNTAIN GOAT--
--LET'S SEE IF YOU'VE THE SURE-FOOTING OF ONE AS WELL.
NNO!
BEL'S HOLY NAME! DON'T LEAVE ME FALL!
BUT YOU'VE PAID NO RESCUE TAX! HA!

BEL GRANT YE GOLD AND RICHES, WOMAN!
YOUR GOD OF THIEVES CAN KEEP HIS GIFTS.
OFF WITH YOU, BRIGAND!

HA! YOU'RE MERCIFUL FOR A DESERT NOMAD, AYELET!
IS IT NOT A QUEEN'S RESPONSIBILITY TO SHOW MERCY WHERE SHE CAN, CONAN?
THERE'S A POINT, PRINCESS, SO LONG AS COMPASSION DOESN'T CLOUD A MONARCH'S JUSTICE.

BUT COME, CONAN-- WE SPEAK OF KINGS AND QUEENS, AND I'VE YET TO CLAIM MY THRONE.


THE NEW MOON BATHES THE INNER WALLS OF TEL-AMMON IN ITS GLOW, LIGHTING THE WAY FOR NOISY REVELERS AND GUESTS...
...FOR TONIGHT MARKS ANNIVERSARY OF KING NEBUHAN'S REIGN...

WHAT DO YOU *MEAN* WE'RE SHORT TWO PASSES!? TAKE THAT UP WITH YOUR CHANCELLOR IBRAM! HE'S THE ONE WHO HIRED US!
THE *CARNIVAL OF BEHESH AMIN* TRAVELS ALL THE DUSTY MILES FROM ASGALUN TO ENTERTAIN AT THE ROYAL CELEBRATION...

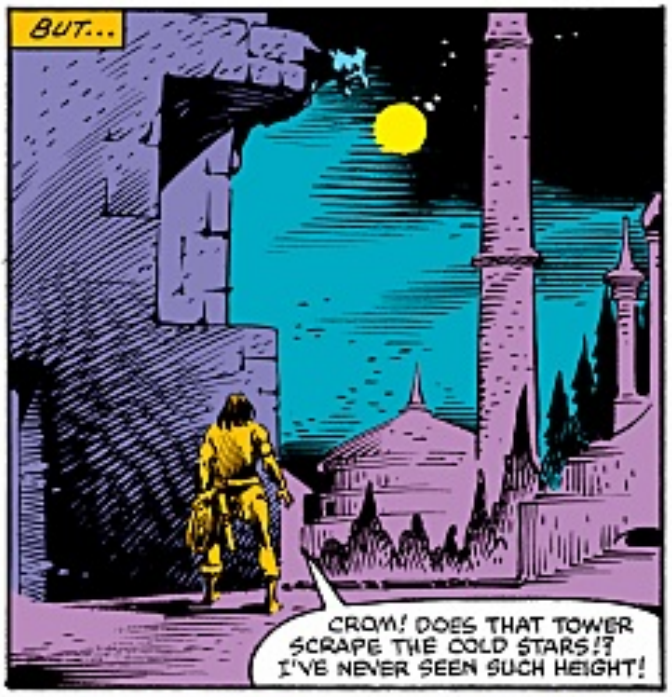
...AND *YOU* HOLD US UP AT THE GATES!
THESE ARE ARTISTS MY GOOD MAN, *ARTISTS!*
IF THEY'VE NO TIME TO REHEARSE AND NEBUHAN'S DISPLEASED, YOU GUARDS INVITE THE HANGMAN'S NOOSE ABOUT YOUR NECKS!

BAH! IT SEEMS THE CHANCELLOR LETS THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD PASS THROUGH THIS TOPSY TURVY NIGHT!
GET ON IN!

A PERFORMANCE WORTH A GOLDEN PALM, BEHESH AMIN.
MAY A THOUSAND FRAGRANT HENNA-FLOWERS BLOOM FOREVER IN YOUR VINEYARDS FOR YOUR GENEROSITY, KIND STRANGER!

THE TOWER OF BET-SHAID LIES IN THE VERY SHADOW OF THE PALACE. THE PROPHECY MUST BE FULFILLED BEFORE THE NIGHT GROWS OLD.
AYE, MIDNIGHT, IN THE GREAT HALL.

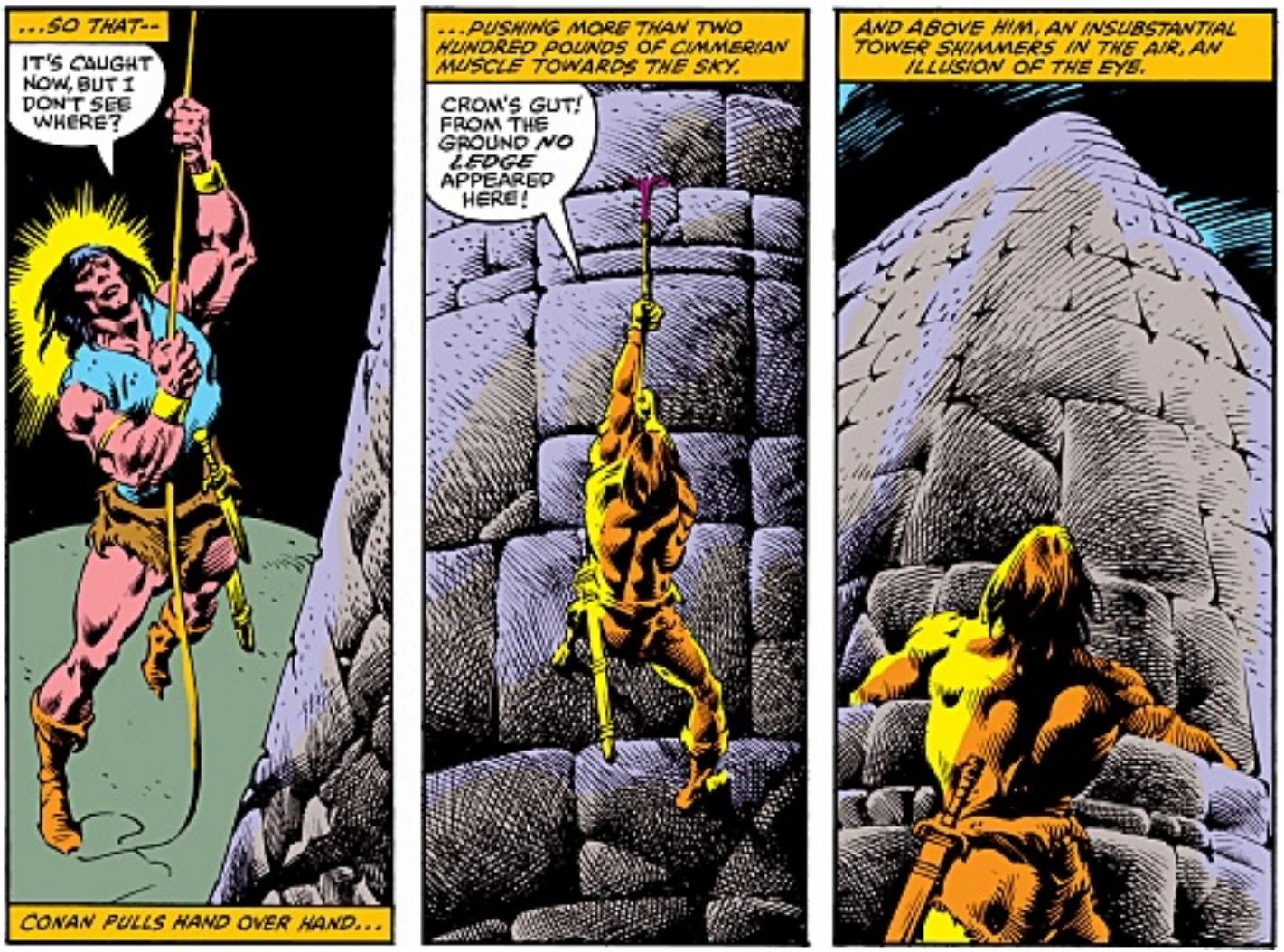
IF GRIM DETERMINATION WERE ENOUGH TO FULFILL THIS EVENING'S TASK...
...CONAN MIGHT WELL CONSIDER IT FULFILLED.


BUT...
CROM! DOES THAT TOWER SCRAPE THE COLD STARS!? I'VE NEVER SEEN SUCH HEIGHT!

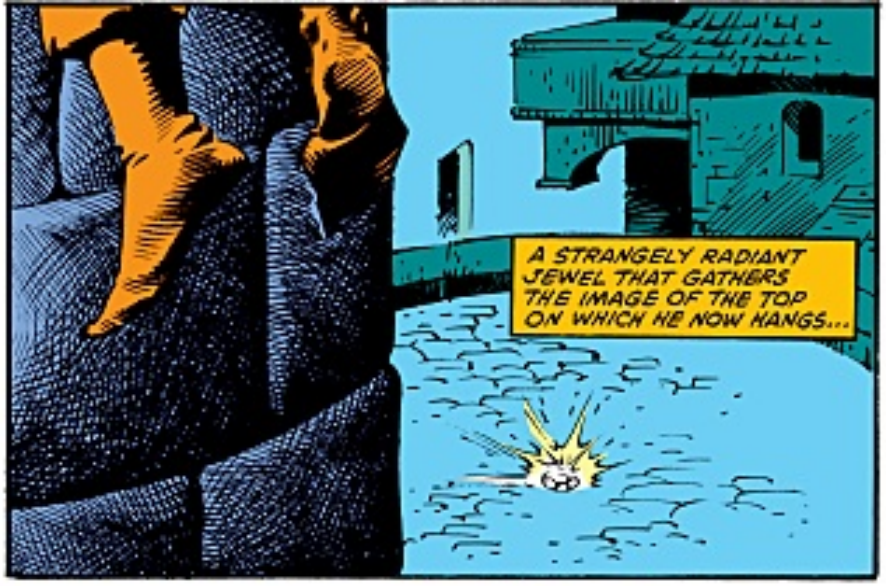
CIRCLING THE BASE, THE DAUNTLESS KING OF AQUILONIA DOES NOT EXPECT TO FIND AN EASY OPENING.
NOR DOES HE.

CROM'S GULLET! IT SEEMS BUILT OF ONE PIECE WITH NO LEDGE FOR THIS GRAPPLING IRON TO CATCH. STILL, I'LL CAST--

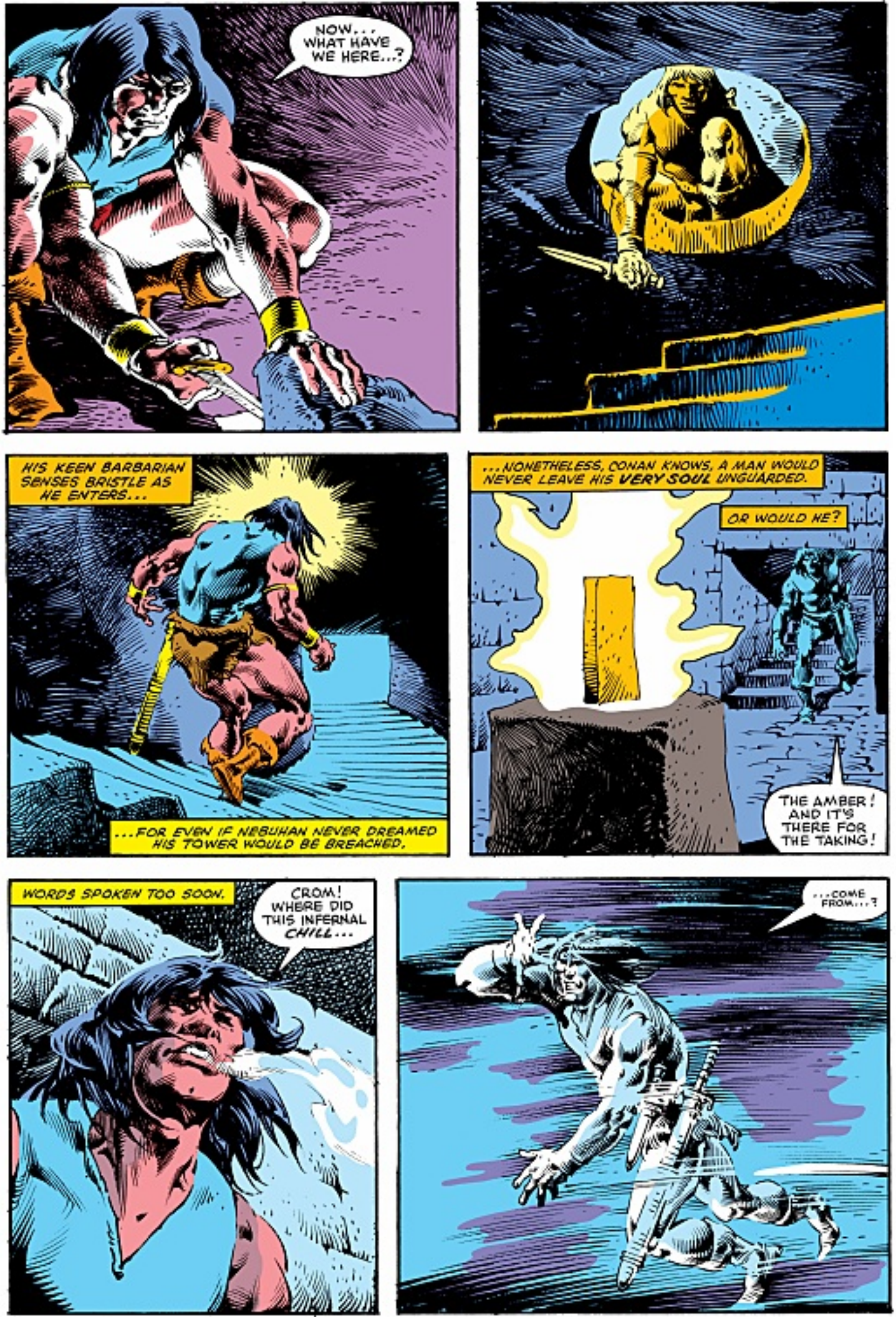
SWISH
BLAST!
THUP
THE DEVIL CONFOUND THIS CLOUD-CAPPED TURRET!
BUT EVEN AS HE CURSES THE TOWER'S SOARING HEIGHT, CONAN WONDERS IF TWENTY SPRINGS GONE HE MIGHT NOT HAVE MADE THAT FIRST CAST CATCH...
...AND WITH REDOUBLED WILL HE PRESSES EVERY CORDED SINEW TO THE TASK...

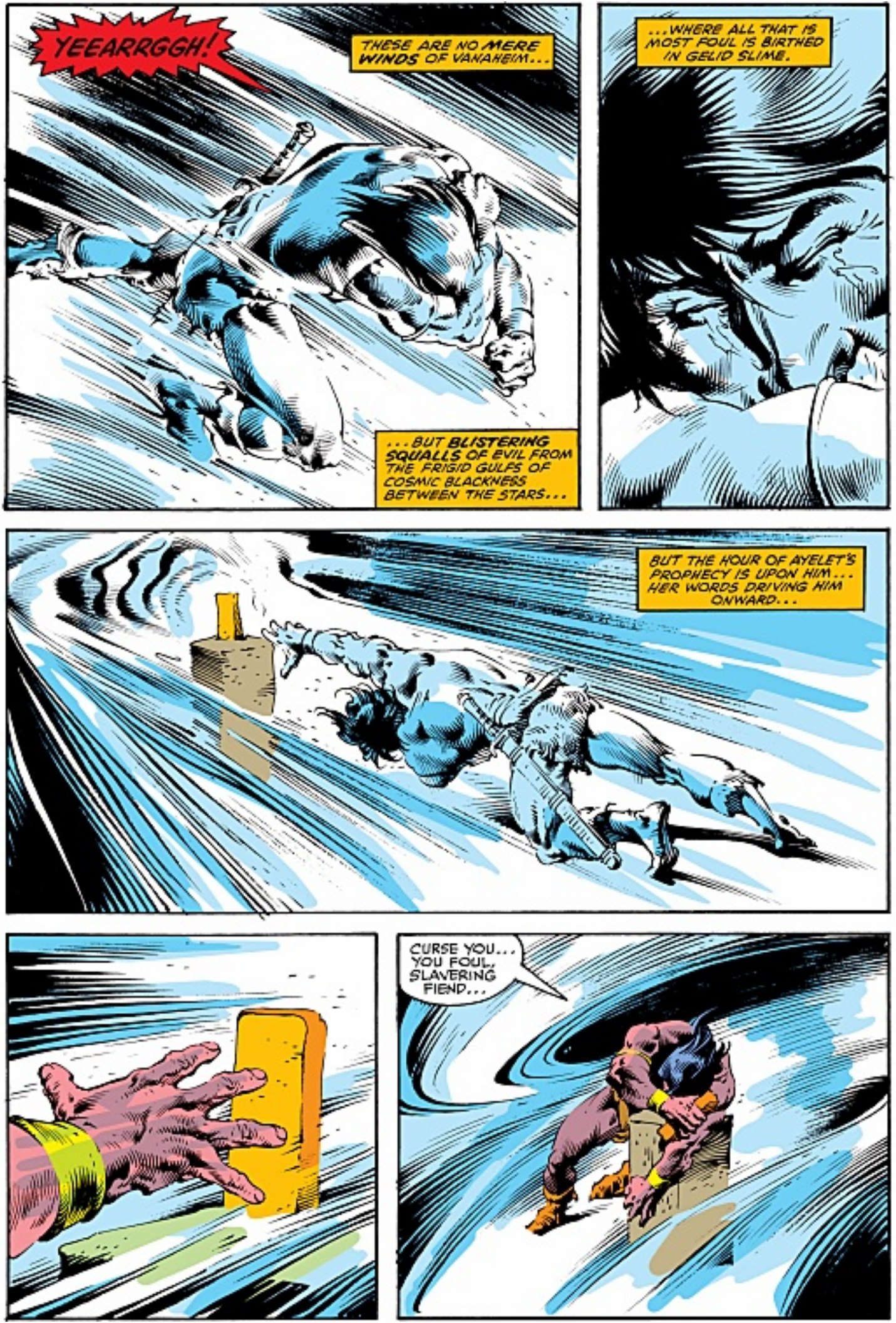

...SO THAT--
IT'S CAUGHT NOW, BUT I DON'T SEE WHERE?
CONAN PULLS HAND OVER HAND...
...PUSHING MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED POUNDS OF CIMMERIAN MUSCLE TOWARDS THE SKY.
CROM'S GUT! FROM THE GROUND NO LEDGE APPEARED HERE!
AND ABOVE HIM, AN INSUBSTANTIAL TOWER SHIMMERS IN THE AIR, AN ILLUSION OF THE EYE.

LOOKING DOWN, CONAN FINDS ANSWER TO HIS BEWILDERMENT--


A STRANGELY RADIANT JEWEL THAT GATHERS THE IMAGE OF THE TOP ON WHICH HE NOW HANGS...

...AND REFLECTS IT LIKE AN ENDLESS SPIRE UP TOWARDS THE HEAVENS.


NOW... WHAT HAVE WE HERE...?
HIS KEEN BARBARIAN SENSES BRISTLE AS HE ENTERS...
...FOR EVEN IF NEBUHAN NEVER DREAMED HIS TOWER WOULD BE BREACHED,
...NONETHELESS, CONAN KNOWS, A MAN WOULD NEVER LEAVE HIS VERY SOUL UNGUARDED.
OR WOULD HE?
THE AMBER! AND IT'S THERE FOR THE TAKING!
WORDS SPOKEN TOO SOON.
CROM! WHERE DID THIS INFERNAL CHILL...
...COME FROM...?


YEEARRGGH!
THESE ARE NO MERE WINDS OF VANAHEIM...
...BUT BLISTERING SQUALLS OF EVIL FROM THE FRIGID GULFS OF COSMIC BLACKNESS BETWEEN THE STARS...
...WHERE ALL THAT IS MOST FOUL IS BIRTHED IN GELID SLIME.
BUT THE HOUR OF AYELET'S PROPHECY IS UPON HIM... HER WORDS DRIVING HIM ONWARD...
CURSE YOU... YOU FOUL, SLAVERING FIEND...

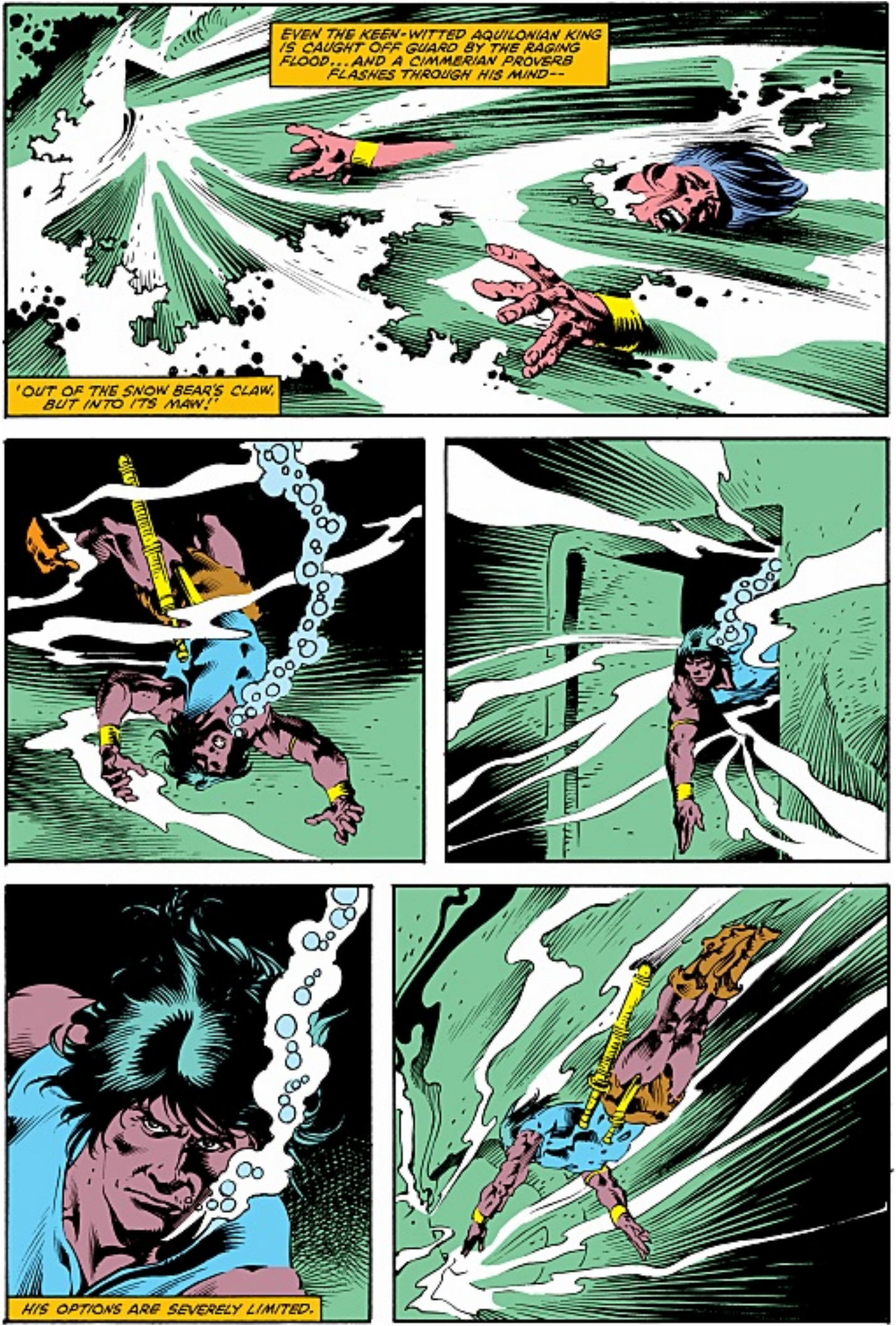
...I HAVE MY PRIZE!
ALL THE PAIN HE HAS BORNE 'TIL NOW SEEMS LIKE A COOL MORNING DRAFT...
...COMPARED TO THE ULTIMATE COLDNESS OF THE DIABOLIC NORTHERN GOLD THAT BURNS HIS FINGERS LIKE A THOUSAND NAILS OF ICE DRIVEN SHIVERING THROUGH HIS FLESH.
AND I MEAN TO...
...KEEP IT...
BONGG BONGG
WHAT UNEARTHLY RINGING--!?
CROM ONLY KNOWS, BUT THAT'S A SIGNAL. THE AMBER'S BEEN FILCHED, OR I'M A BLACK-EYED PICT!
THAT MEANS I STAND A LIKELY CHANCE OF BEING RAKED WITH A VOLLEY OF ARROWS IF I RISK THE GRAPPLING DOWN.
BUT THERE IS THE STAIRCASE...

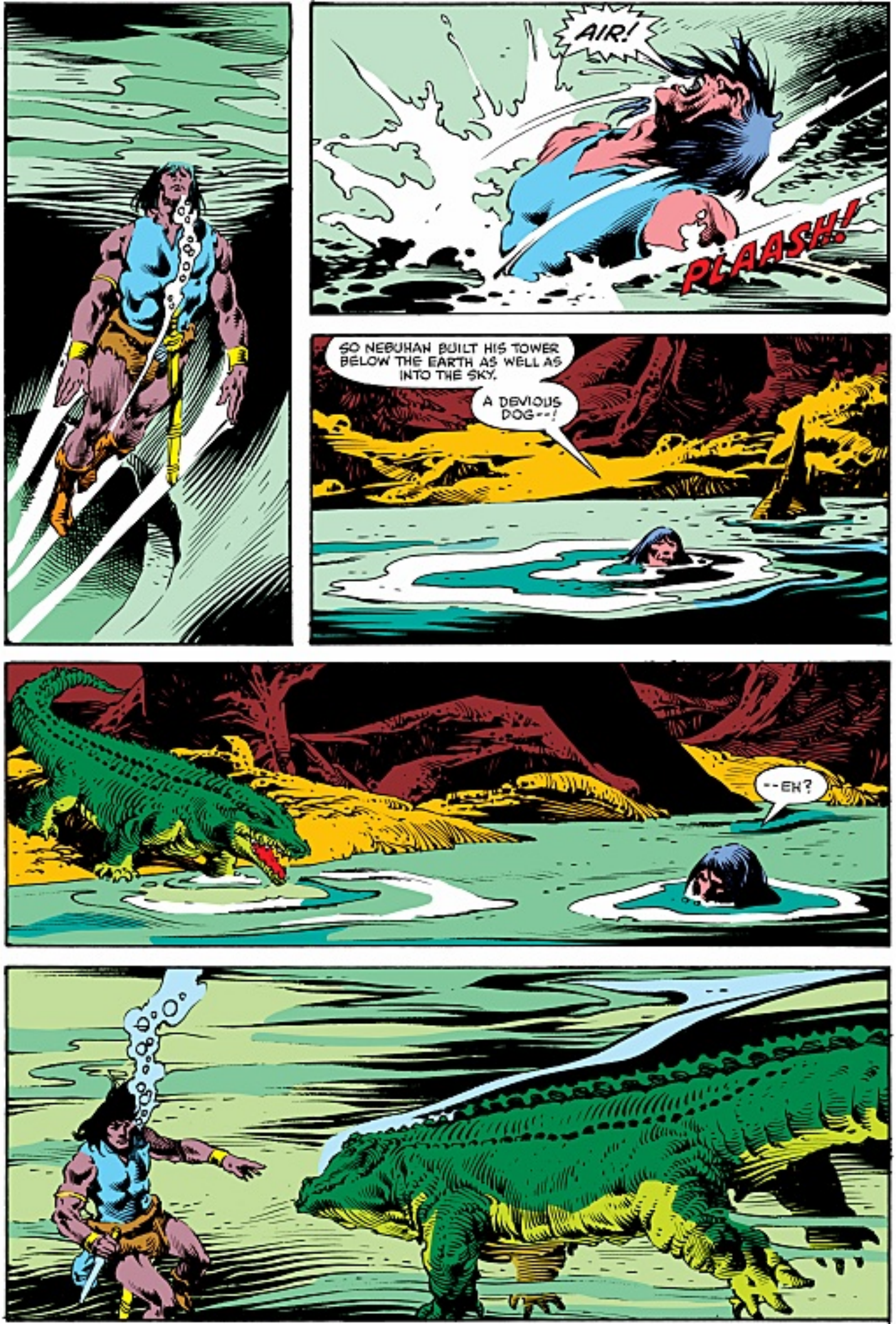
BONGG
ANY DOOR'S BETTER THAN A BLIND END.

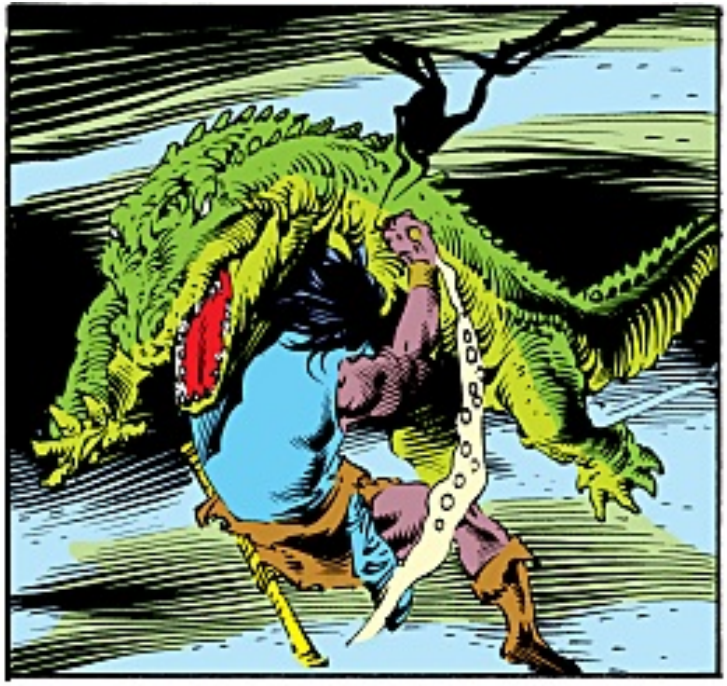
BONGG
HANG IT! THE MISERABLE BOLT'S RUSTED!

BUT HE KNOWS THERE IS LITTLE TIME LEFT TO MIDNIGHT.
AND THERE IS A NOBLE AND STUNNING QUEEN-TO-BE WHO AWAITS HIM.

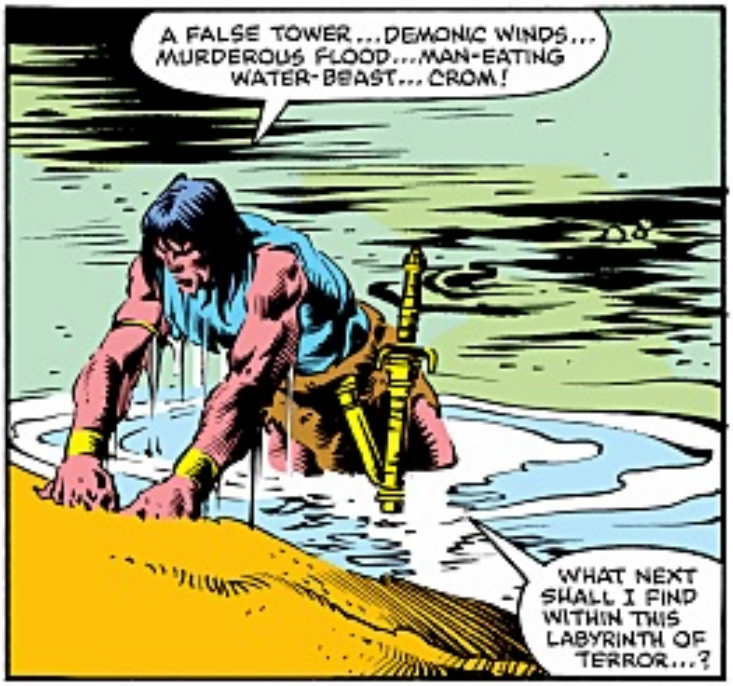
THERE! WHAT--!?


EVEN THE KEEN-WITTED AQUILONIAN KING IS CAUGHT OFF GUARD BY THE RAGING FLOOD... AND A CIMMERIAN PROVERB FLASHES THROUGH HIS MIND--
'OUT OF THE SNOW BEAR'S CLAW, BUT INTO ITS MAW!'
HIS OPTIONS ARE SEVERELY LIMITED.


AIR!
PLAASH!
SO NEBUHAN BUILT HIS TOWER BELOW THE EARTH AS WELL AS INTO THE SKY.
A DEVIOUS DOG--!
--EH?

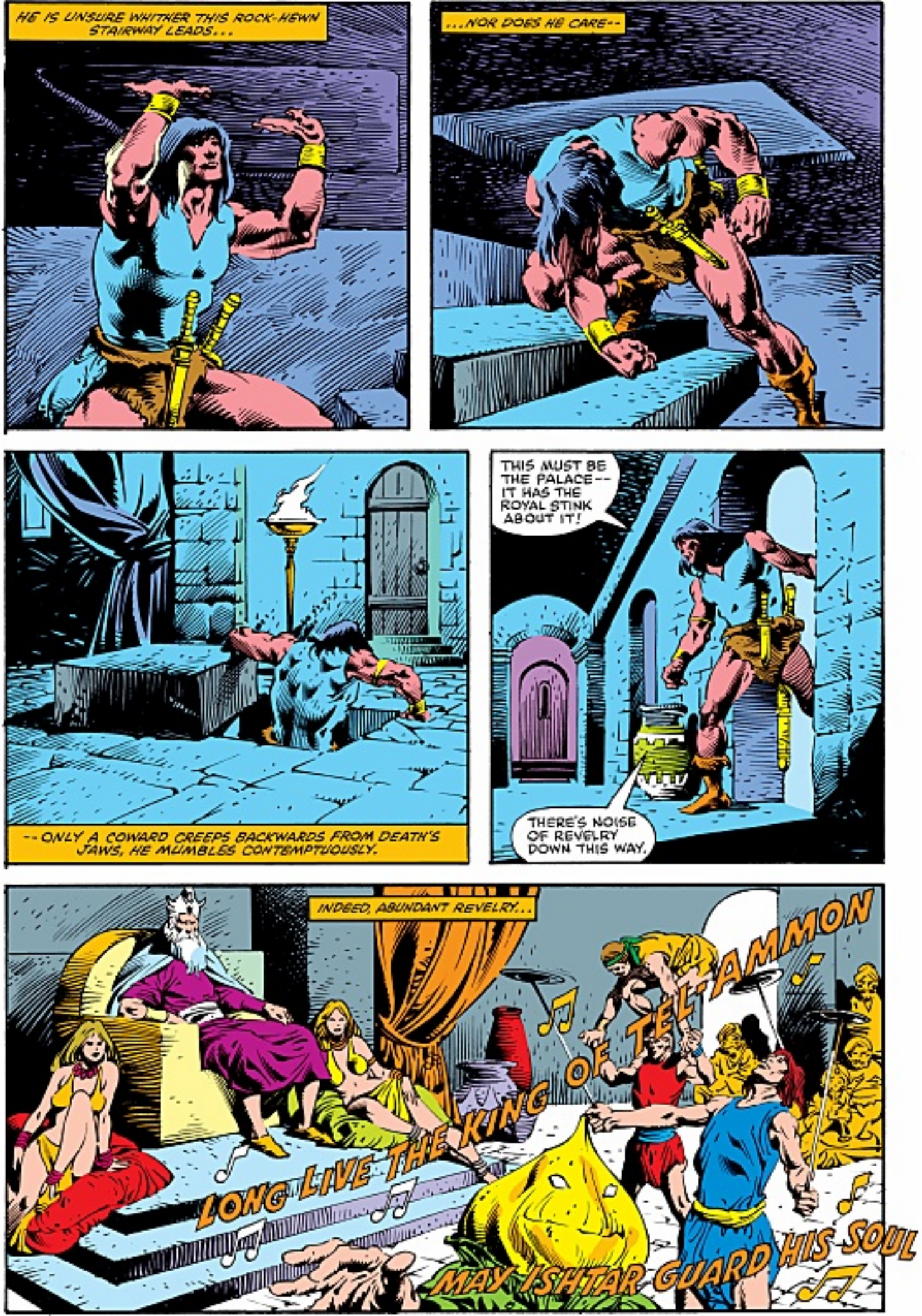


SWAASH!
PLAASH

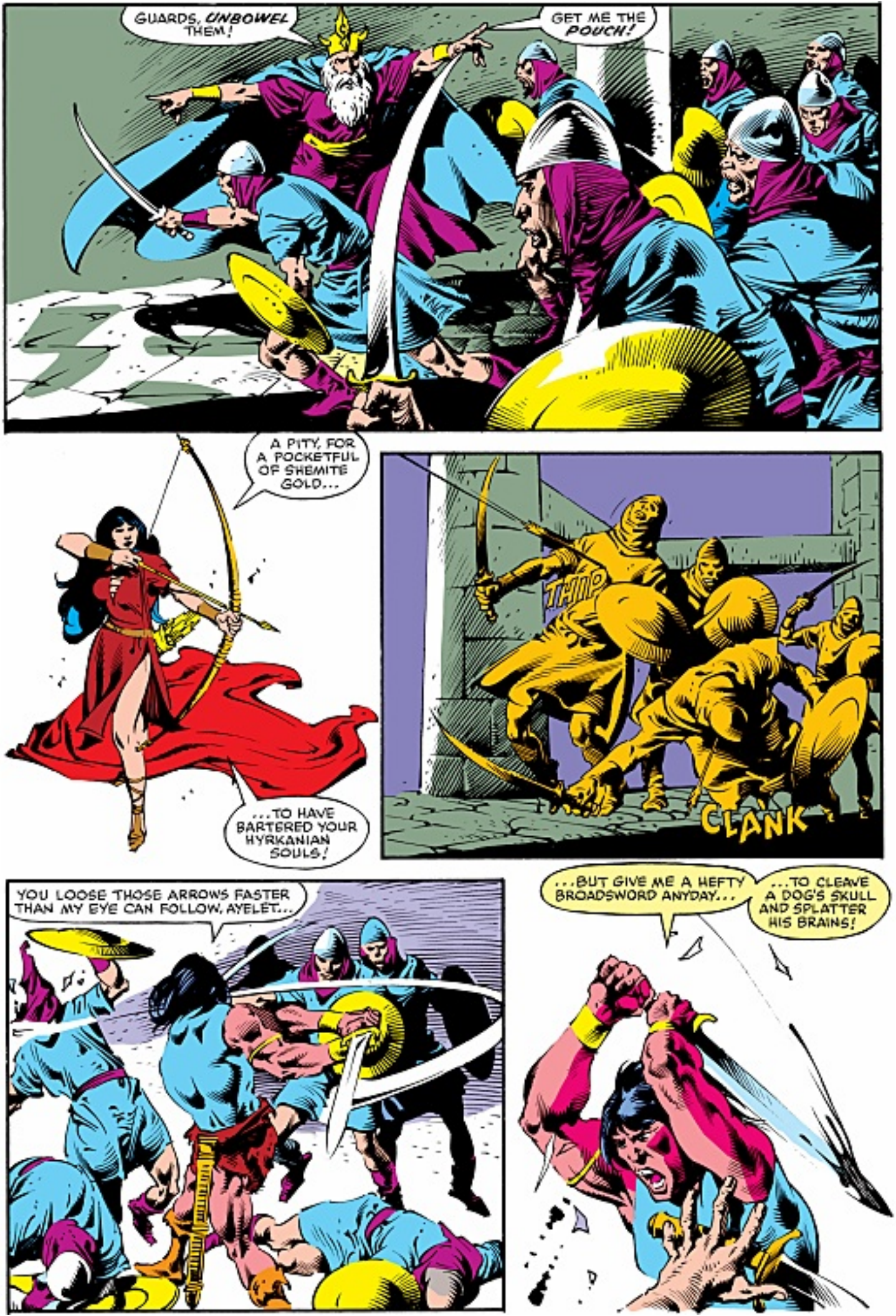

A FALSE TOWER...DEMONIC WINDS... MURDEROUS FLOOD...MAN-EATING WATER-BEAST... CROM!
WHAT NEXT SHALL I FIND WITHIN THIS LABYRINTH OF TERROR...?

...MORE STAIRS.

I'VE ALREADY CLIMBED THE EQUAL OF TEN ZIKKURATS THIS DAY!


HE IS UNSURE WHITHER THIS ROCK-HEWN STAIRWAY LEADS...
...NOR DOES HE CARE--
--ONLY A COWARD CREEPS BACKWARDS FROM DEATH'S JAWS, HE MUMBLES CONTEMPTUOUSLY.
THIS MUST BE THE PALACE-- IT HAS THE ROYAL STINK ABOUT IT!
THERE'S NOISE OF REVELRY DOWN THIS WAY.
INDEED, ABUNDANT REVELRY...
LONG LIVE THE KING OF TEL-AMMON
MAY ISHTAR GUARD HIS SOUL

...EH?
IT'S THE FAINTEST OF SOUNDS, HOPELESSLY LOST AMONG THE CACOPHONOUS REVELRY...
...THAT KNELL...
BONGG!
...YET IT RINGS LOUD AND STRONG IN KING NEBUHAN'S EAR.
AYELET!
WHAT!? WHO IS THIS WILD DOG!?
I'M YOUR RED DOOM, SWINE!
AYELET! THE AMBER'S IN THIS POUCH!
ISHTAR! NOW THEN THE LIONESS WILL ROAR A BLOODY TYRANT'S DEATH!


GUARDS, UNBOWEL THEM!
GET ME THE POUCH!
A PITY, FOR A POCKETFUL OF SHEMITE GOLD...
...TO HAVE BARTERED YOUR HYRKANIAN SOULS!
THIP
CLANK
YOU LOOSE THOSE ARROWS FASTER THAN MY EYE CAN FOLLOW, AYELET...
...BUT GIVE ME A HEFTY BROADSWORD ANYDAY...
...TO CLEAVE A DOG'S SKULL AND SPLATTER HIS BRAINS!

YET, NOT EVERYONE THRILLS TO THE GORE OF BATTLE AS DOES CONAN...
LET ME THROUGH!
RUN!
FLEE!
FOR SURE, YOU'RE NO WARRIORS, BUT CHAMBERMAIDS COSTUMED FOR NEBUHAN'S PARTYING!
CLANG
CLATTER
THEY SLAY MY PERSONAL GUARD!
MY LIFE IS FORFEIT IF THEY SHOULD FIND ME!
BONGG
NOW...WHAT OF NEBUHAN...?

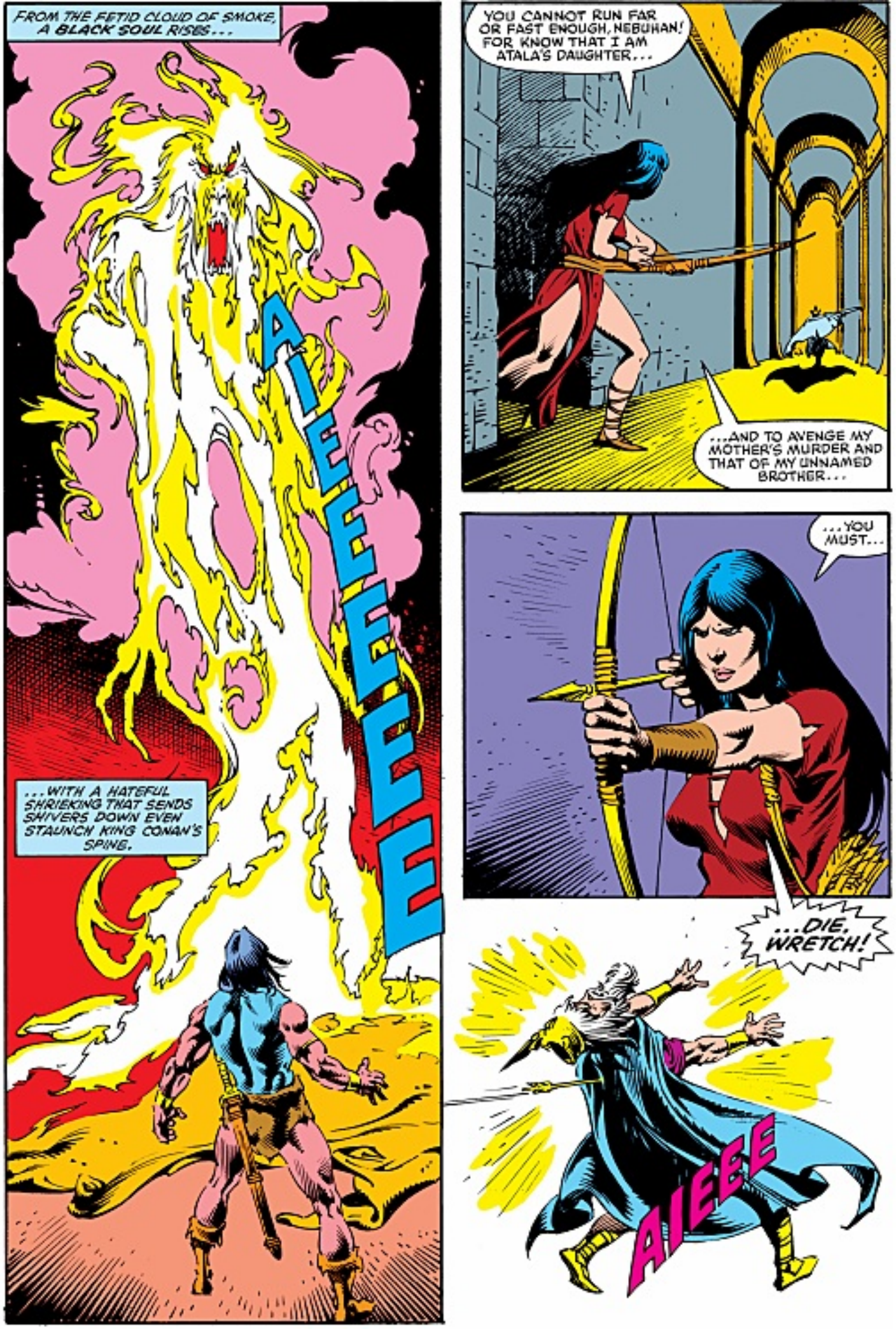
THE TYRANT FLED LIKE A FRIGHTENED BUCK WHILE WE FOUGHT--

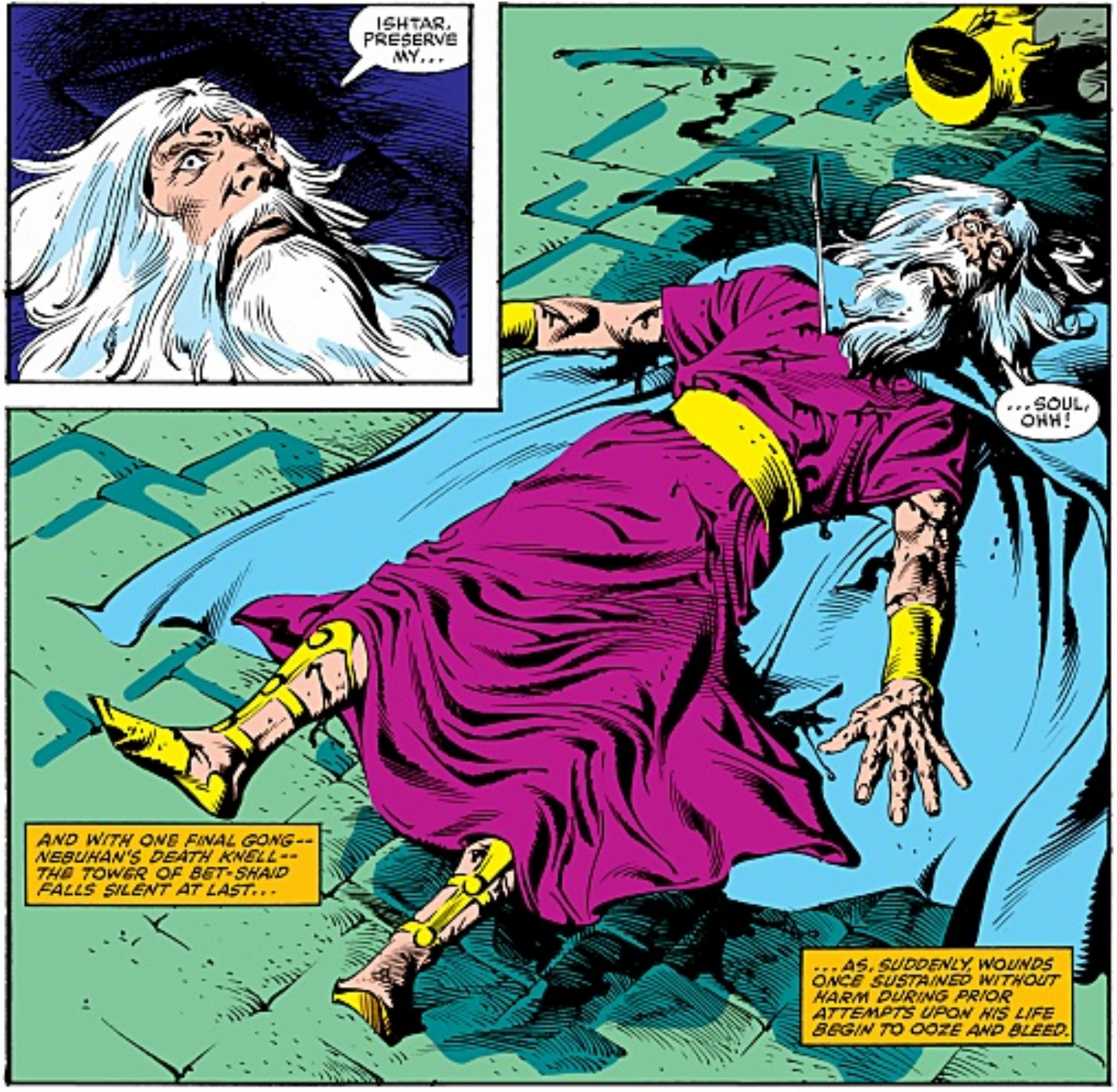
I MUSTN'T LOSE HIM NOW!
BONGG!

RUN, PRINCESS!

I'LL SET THIS STUFF AFIRE...
FLAAM
SPUT
SPAK

...AND ROAST THE AMBER.


FROM THE FETID CLOUD OF SMOKE, A BLACK SOUL RISES...
AIEEEEEEE
...WITH A HATEFUL SHRIEKING THAT SENDS SHIVERS DOWN EVEN STAUNCH KING CONAN'S SPINE.
YOU CANNOT RUN FAR OR FAST ENOUGH, NEBUHAN! FOR KNOW THAT I AM ATALA'S DAUGHTER...
...AND TO AVENGE MY MOTHER'S MURDER AND THAT OF MY UNNAMED BROTHER...
...YOU MUST...
...DIE, WRETCH!
AIEEE


ISHTAR, PRESERVE MY...
...SOUL, OHH!
AND WITH ONE FINAL GONG-- NEBUHAN'S DEATH KNELL-- THE TOWER OF BET-SHAID FALLS SILENT AT LAST...
...AS, SUDDENLY, WOUNDS ONCE SUSTAINED WITHOUT HARM DURING PRIOR ATTEMPTS UPON HIS LIFE BEGIN TO OOZE AND BLEED.

WELL, BLOODY NEBUHAN, YOUR FINAL TRIBUTE'S PAID IN FIRE! NOW TO FIND--

--AYELET! HAVE YOU--
MY CRUEL FATHER'S SLAIN, CONAN, THE MOON IS FULL, AND LION AND LIONESS PROWL TEL-AMMON, THE PROPHECY'S FULFILLED!

LOOK--THE WICKED KING'S PALACE BURNS!
YOUR EYES AND EARS, PEOPLE OF TEL-AMMON! NEBUHAN IS DEAD.
TONIGHT A NEW AND RIGHTFUL QUEEN, AYELET, DAUGHTER OF BELOVED ATALA, SITS YOUR THRONE.
I HOLD THE HOLY SCROLL OF PROPHECY!
LONG LIVE THE QUEEN!
THE TYRANT'S REIGN OF BLOOD IS OVER, AND ISHTAR'S FLAMES NOW CLEANSE THE PALACE TO ITS FOUNDATION.
JUSTICE, TEMPERED BY MERCY, RETURNS TO TEL-AMMON.
BEHOLD THE BIRTHMARK OF THE LIONESS!
LET AQUILONIA BE THE FIRST NATION TO RECOGNIZE *QUEEN* AYELET!
STILL, I'VE A QUEEN OF MY OWN AWAITS MY RETURN, AND, COME DAWN, I'M TARANTIA-BOUND.
BUT, CROM! DAWN'S YET A FAR WAYS OFF--WHAT SAY WE MEASURE THE HOURS 'TIL THEN IN FLAGONS OF PURPLE SHEMITE WINE...?
FIN

KING CONAN

% MARVEL COMICS GROUP
387 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

JIM OWSLEY
EDITOR

Al Zelenetz, the new scripter on **KING CONAN,** and I had lunch the other day (on Marvel, of course) to toss around a few ideas for the strip. We were presented with the problem any editorial team encounters when they take over a highly successful book with a proven track record of excellence: how to top what's been done before. How to improve a good thing amidst a legion of cynical bystanders who are all waiting for you to fall on your face. Well, we talked, and talked. The more we talked, the more great ideas were suggested. The excitement grew. By the time we were done, Al's eyes were blazing, his heart was racing, and he was standing atop our table, butter knife in hand, screaming in barbaric rage.

Well, not exactly. But he did kill a perfectly good tree taking a zillion pages of notes, and there were hushed whispers of the words "epic" and "magnificence". You see, we're going to blow **KING CONAN** up and start over; and we're doing it with **dynamite.**

DYNAMITE: Rudy Nebres walked into my office last October and told me that, after several years of working almost exclusively for an alternate publisher, he was returning to Marvel. I asked him if he wanted to baby-sit **KING CONAN** while Marc Silvestri sharpened his pencils. He said he would if I got John Buscema to draw it. John said yes; the rest is magic.

DYNAMITE: Rudy's pencilling *and* inking **KING CONAN #18,** a sample of which appears on the following page. Next issue's Alan Zelenetz thriller "Devil Of Darfar" promises to be not only one of the best sword and sorcery mags you'll read this year, but one of the best *comics* you'll read this year. Period. Reserve your copy now. Don't take chances.

DYNAMITE: Penciller Marc Silvestri returns after a well-earned rest in **KING CONAN #19.** The first few pages arrived yesterday. These are blockbuster graphics guaranteed to leave you dazzled. Guaranteed. We promise.

DYNAMITE: Our companion black and white magazine **SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN** features another story by Buscema and Nebres this month **(#88 May).** A 50-page black and white masterpiece by Michael Fleisher called "Isle Of The Hunter".

DYNAMITE: KING CONAN #20. So awesome. So revolutionary. So completely different from anything we've ever done before, we can't even talk about it. Yet.

I guess what I'm trying to say is if you've never been into sword and sorcery before; if you never thought a barbarian book was for you… we're out to prove you dead wrong. This is the book to keep your eye on. This one. Watch this space.

This is the Marvel Age of comics. Again.

JIM OWSLEY

DON'T MISS *NEXT* ISSUE!

"DEVIL OF DARFAR!"

KING CONAN #18 ON SALE IN MAY!

COVER PENCILER & INKER: MARIE SEVERIN

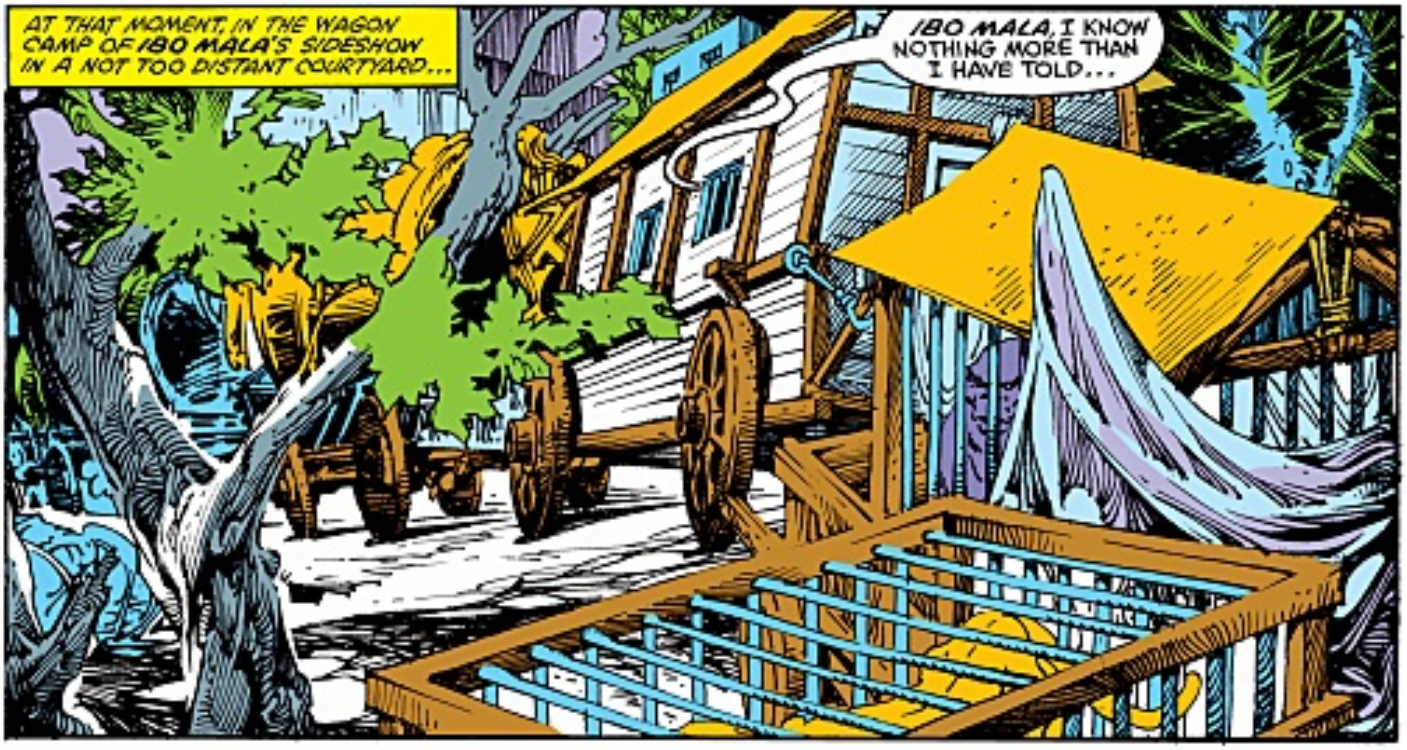
CIMMERIA'S NO ♪ MERRIER, ♫ AND OPHIR'S GOT THE GOLD, LADS!
WELL, THIS LAND OF OPHIR CAN KEEP HER GOLD, EH, WHITE TEMPEST?
ONCE WE'VE PUSHED THE TYBOR RIVER, YOU'LL TRAMPLE FAMILIAR SOIL BENEATH THOSE HOOVES AGAIN...
HNN
...AND IT'S BACK TO PLAYING KING OF AQUILONIA FOR ME.
WHOA--!
A PIT! WHAT SCURVY--!?
HNNNH
A HYBORIAN AGE CLASSIC BY:
ALAN ZELENETZ
SCRIPT
RUDY NEBRES
ART

Stan Lee PRESENTS

THE DEVIL

OF DARFAR

HORNS, BOYS! HORNS, BOYS!
AND DRINK LIKE HIS SIRE
WITH A LARGE PAIR OF HORNS
AH! KHORALA'S GRAND PROCESSION IS SECOND TO NONE ELSE IN THE REALM, MY DEAR.
INDEED, MY LORD, I DO SHARE THE THRONE OF OPHIR WITH GREAT PRIDE THIS DAY.
BLESS US, SWEET MITRA!
AND HUNDREDS OF DIGNITARIES HAVE COME FROM AS FAR AS DISTANT KHITAI FOR TONIGHT'S GRAND FESTIVITIES IN OUR COURT.
THOUGH I CONFESS THEY ARE MORE ANXIOUS TO SEE IBO MALA'S FAMED CARNIVAL OF GROTESQUES THAN TO HONOR THE GENTLE LORD, MITRA.


AT THAT MOMENT, IN THE WAGON CAMP OF IBO MALA'S SIDESHOW IN A NOT TOO DISTANT COURTYARD...
IBO MALA, I KNOW NOTHING MORE THAN I HAVE TOLD...

...OH! MY ARMS HURT SO.

THEN PERHAPS A TASTE OF MY THROWING IRON WILL HELP YOU FORGET THE PAIN OF YOUR ARMS...

NO!

...AND REMEMBER WHERE THE OTHERS HAVE ESCAPED TO.

NOW, AGAIN, DOG-- WHERE DID MONTAGO TAKE MY SLAVES!?
SLIIT
I... DON'T KNOW...
WHERE!?
SLIIT
I WAS NOT AMONG THEM... I HEARD ONLY RUNNING...
MERCY, IBO MALA, MERCY!

SO, THE MONGREL PLEADS MERCY!?
HERE, THEN IS YOUR--
--MERCY!

CUT THE COWARD DOWN. I'VE LEFT HIS HEART UNTOUCHED. ROAST IT FOR ME.

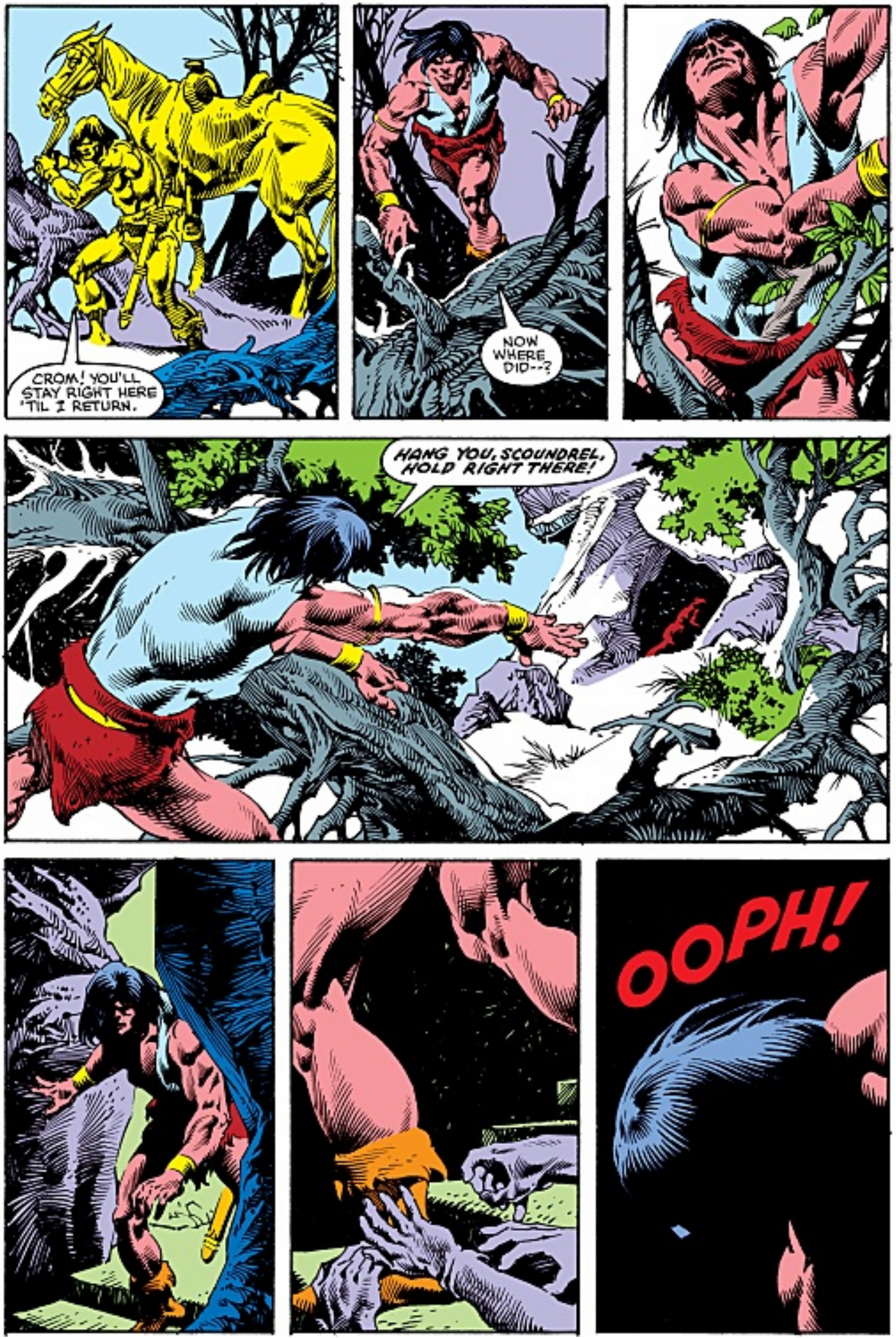
WHERE ARE FUROS AND DAMON, THE TWO DOGS WHO WERE SUPPOSED TO BE ON WATCH WHEN THE ESCAPE OCCURRED?
THEY STILL SCOUR THE WOODS FOR THE MISSING SLAVES.

CURSE THEIR CARCASSES! DO THEY KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DIS-APPOINT THE KING THIS EVENING!?
COUNTLESS GOLD WILL BE LOST...
...AND LUXURIES I COULD NO LONGER DO WITHOUT...
...AND THE REPUTATION OF MY ENTERPRISE. ALL I'VE ACCOMPLISHED WILL BE RUINED, BY JHIL, *RUINED!*
NO.
I'LL SKIN FUROS AND DAMON RAW LIKE ANTELOPES IF THEY FAIL TO RETURN WITH MY GROTESQUES BY NIGHTFALL!

MEANWHILE...
CROM!
I'LL CARVE THE LIVER FROM WHO-EVER SET THAT TRAP OF FALSE LEAVES AND NETTING!
I SWEAR HIS BLOOD WILL PAY FOR YOURS, WHITE TEMPEST!
UNPH! THERE, NOBLE ONE, YOU'RE OUT OF MISERY AT LEAST.
I'LL HAVE THE DEVIL OF A TIME GETTING OUT OF THIS MUDPIT, THOUGH --
AH-- THERE!
NOW TO --
BLAST IT!

ABOVE THE PIT...
LOOK, DAMON, SOMETHING'S FALLEN INTO THE TRAP.
PRAY MITRA IT'S ONE OF THE RUN-AWAYS OR IBO MALA WILL HAVE OUR HEADS.
I'D SOONER BE BURNT TO ASHES ON AN ALTAR OF THE DARK SERPENT SET THAN HAVE IBO MALA GORGE HIMSELF ON MY FAT. IF HIS PAY WEREN'T SO BLASTED GOOD--
WELL, LET'S SEE IF WE'VE HAD LUCK--
UNFFH!
NAY, DOG-FACE, IT'S NOT ONE OF YOUR RUNAWAYS!
ONLY A BORN CIMMERIAN HILLMAN COULD CLIMB THAT WALL OF DIRT!
NOW YOU'LL ANSWER FOR THE DEATH OF A STALLION WORTH FIFTY OF YOUR KIND, SCUM!

YOU'VE A FLAPPING TONGUE, STRANGER, BUT THIS DAGGER WILL RELIEVE YOU OF IT!
IF MY TONGUE'S TOO LOOSE FOR YOU, TALK TO MY BLADE, YOU MISERABE JACKAL!
NOW I'LL SHEAR THE HEAD OFF YOUR DOG PARTNER--!?
HNNH
FLEE TO YOUR KENNEL, THEN, YOU CRINGING CUR!
WELL, THIS NAG WILL HAVE TO DO UNTIL--
SNAP
WHO'S THAT--?


CROM! YOU'LL STAY RIGHT HERE 'TIL I RETURN.
NOW WHERE DID--?
HANG YOU, SCOUNDREL, HOLD RIGHT THERE!
OOPH!

CROM! WHAT BLACK LUCK HAVE I TUMBLED INTO NOW!?

THE DEVIL ANSWER THAT!
THIS SWORD LAST HACKED A SCORE OF HYRKANIAN GUARDSMEN INTO A HEAP OF MANGLED CORPSES.*
* LAST ISH- JIM.

WOULD YOU TRY IT AGAINST YOUR LONE PICKAXE, DOGS!?

I AM MONTAGO. STAY YOUR STEEL, STRANGER, AND ACCEPT OUR APOLOGIES.
WE EXPECTED ONE OF IBO MALA'S MEN.
IBO MALA? THAT'S THE SECOND TIME I'VE HEARD THAT INFERNAL NAME THIS HOUR.
I GUTTED ONE OF HIS LACKEYS IN THE WOODS ABOVE. WHO IN DARK TARNATION IS THIS CUR?
MORE THAN A CUR, STRANGER-- IBO MALA'S A CURSED DEVIL IN MAN'S GUISE.
HE CAME UP FROM DARFAR, THE KINGDOM BESIDE KUSH, WHERE CANNIBAL TRIBESMEN PICK THE MEAT OFF HUMAN BONES LIKE GHOULS.
"YEARS AGO, IBO MALA COMMANDED THE WARRIORS OF DARFAR'S MOST POWERFUL CLAN.
"UNTIL ONE DAY UNWITTINGLY HE LED THEM INTO AN AMBUSH OF HATED FOES.
"ORDERING HIS MEN TO HOLD THEIR GROUND, HE HIMSELF FLED AND LEFT THEM TO BE BUTCHERED.

"HE RETURNED TO HIS TRIBE BOASTING LIES OF BRAVERY AND DARING.
"...BUT A LONE WARRIOR OF HIS SURVIVED, A LIVING CORPSE, AND FOLLOWED TO ACCUSE IBO MALA BEFORE THE INNER COUNCIL.
"IBO MALA WAS STRIPPED OF RANK AND POSSESSIONS.
"THEN, AWAITING THE HOUR OF EXECUTION, HE STRANGLED HIS JAILOR AND ESCAPED.
"NOW HE TRAVELS THE HYBORIAN REALMS, TURNING THE PEOPLE'S LUST FOR THE BIZARRE AND STRANGE INTO PERSONAL WEALTH.
"ALL OF US HERE--BECAUSE WE ARE DIFFERENT--HAVE BEEN DRAGGED FROM OUR HOMES AND MADE HIS PITIFUL SLAVES...
"...PERFORMING IN FAIRS AND MARKETPLACES AND IN ALL THE ROYAL COURTS TO THE JEERS OF CROWDS..."
...AND MOCKING LAUGHTER.

LIKE THE COWARD HE IS, IBO MALA IS A SERVILE FLATTERER TO THE NOBILITY HE COURTS, BUT A CRUEL TYRANT TO THOSE OF US HE HOLDS IN CHAINS.
THESE SCARS ARE UGLIER BY FAR THAN THAN THE MONSTROUS FACE I NOW CAN HIDE BENEATH THIS SACK...
HOW DID YOU FREE YOURSELVES, THEN?
...FOR I WAS BORN WITH TWISTED FEATURES. THEY COULD NOT BE HELPED.
THESE SCARS, HOWEVER, ARE THE PURPOSEFUL DESIGN OF AN EVIL MAN.
"LAST NIGHT, THROUGH OVERSIGHT, NONE LOCKED MY SHACKLES. I FEIGNED ILLNESS...
"...AND SOON OVERCAME MY GUARD...
"...THEN BROKE THE MANACLES OF AS MANY OF MY FELLOWS AS TIME ALLOWED.
"SO FEARFUL WERE THEY OF THE WICKED IBO MALA THEY AT FIRST REFUSED TO RUN, UNTIL THE NOISE OF OTHER GUARDS, RETURNING DRUNK FROM THE TAVERN, FRIGHTENED THEM INTO FOLLOWING ME.
"THUS HAS THE *DEVIL OF DARFAR* CRUSHED THEIR SPIRITS."

WELL YOU'LL DIE LIKE DOGS IF YOU STAY CRINGING IN THIS DARK HOLE.
"I WAS ALSO A SLAVE ONCE, IN THE FILTHY PIGPENS OF HYPERBOREA, UNTIL I SWUNG MY CHAINS INTO THE TEETH OF SOME LUCKLESS GUARDS AND RAN.
"THEN I CARVED MY WAY ACROSS THIS CONTINENT, AYE, AND OVER THE BLUE WAVES OF THE WESTERN OCEAN...
"...UNTIL ONE DAY KING NUMEDIDES OF AQUILONIA LAY IN HIS OWN BLOOD AT MY FEET, AND I CLAPPED HIS CROWN TO MY BROW.
"I AM KING CONAN, OF AQUILONIA.
"180 MALA'S HENCHMEN CRIPPLED THE ROYAL STALLION GIVEN ME BY MY QUEEN, ZENOBIA, AS A LOVE TOKEN. I'D NEVER SEEN A HANDSOMER STEED."

FOR THAT ALONE I'D WRING THIS IBO MALA'S NECK 'TIL HIS VEINS BURST AT HIS TEMPLES!

TELL ME WHERE THE DEVIL'S PUT UP AND I'LL MAKE A PAIR OF BREECHES OF HIS SUNBURNT HIDE!
AYE, BE OUR KING, SIRE! FREE US FROM IBO MALA!

I WILL JOIN YOU, CONAN. IBO MALA IS ALREADY ON OUR TRAIL, AND WE CANNOT RUN FOREVER.
I WOULD ATTACK AND PUT AN END TO THE FEAR THAT WRACKS US.
THOUGH I AM UNSKILLED I HAVE STOLEN THE FALLEN GUARD'S SWORD.

AND I'LL GO AS WELL TO SQUIRM MYSELF WHERE YOU CANNOT, AND TO SNEAK ABOUT AFTER OUR ENEMIES.
FOR IBO MALA'S WAGONS OFTEN MOVE FROM DAY TO DAY.

CROM'S BEARD! THEN LET'S BE OFF BEFORE THE NIGHT'S WASTED IN CHATTER!

IT IS EVENING IN THE ROYAL COURT OF KHORALA, WHERE FESTIVITIES ARE LONG UNDER WAY...
THESE KUSHITE WRESTLERS ALREADY TAX MY COURT'S PATIENCE.
WHY DOES 180 MALA FORESTALL THE CARNIVAL AND MASQUE?
THE CROWD GROWS WEARY OF THE WRESTLERS, MASTER. THEY MURMUR--
A THOUSAND INFERNAL TORTURES ON DAMON AND FURDS! WHERE ARE MY GROTESQUES!?
THE WRESTLERS MUST CONTINUE-- THEY ARE OUR ONLY DIVERSION. BUT TIME RUNS SHORT.

ARE THESE TWO SWEATY APES THE BEST OF OPHIR'S ENTERTAINMENT?
LET'S BE RID OF THEM ALREADY!
IT IS AN ANXIOUS AND BREATHLESS DAMON WHO ENTERS THE COURT AT THAT MOMENT...
...AND SEEKS OUT IBO MALA...
FUROS HAS BEEN SLAIN IN THE WOODS, MASTER! AND THE SLAVES...WE...WE COULD NOT FIND HIDE NOR HAIR OF THEM.
JHIL'S GUT!
IBO MALA!

APPROACH THE THRONE, KNAVE!
WHAT--?
MOST HUMBLE APOLOGIES, MAJESTY, I CAN EXPLAIN--
SILENCE! BE YOU SO BRAZEN TO MAKE MOCKERY OF KHORALA'S THRONE BEFORE OUR HONORED GUESTS!?
YOU ARE BENEATH OUR CONTEMPT-- A SCOUNDREL AND A LIAR! QUIT OUR COURT-- YOUR GOLD IS FORFEIT THOUGH YOUR LIFE'S YET SPARED!
BUT DARE TO LURK WITHIN THE CAPITAL COME DAWN, THEN BY NIGHT-FALL OPHIR'S DOGS WILL GNAW YOUR BONES!
HA HA HA
I TAKE MY LEAVE MOST... HUMBLY, YOUR HIGHNESS.

SO, DAMON, YOU VALUE IBO MALA'S FAME AND FORTUNE NO MORE THAN A RHINOCEROS HIDE--!
NO! NO, MASTER-- THE SLAVES DECEIVED US!
I'LL NOT DECEIVE YOU THEN, SLAVERING DOG!
NO!
UNPH
THUNK
WE FIND THOSE ESCAPED HOUNDS THIS NIGHT OR I'LL CRACK EVERY NECK AMONG YOU WRETCHES!

SOON, ARRIVING IN KHORALA...
DURING MITRA'S FEAST THE CITY DOES NOT SLEEP, CONAN. INDOORS, OUTDOORS, COURT, AND TAVERN--ENDLESS REVELRY.

I'LL SPY OUT IBO MALA'S CURRENT WHEREABOUTS. WAIT FOR ME HERE BEFORE THIS INN.

SWIFT AS A DEVIL, DWARF--I'D MAKE SHORT SHRIFT OF THIS ROGUISH ESCAPADE!
FOR THERE'S AN AUBURN BEAUTY AND A STRAPPING PRINCE OF A LAD WAITING FOR ME BACK HOME.

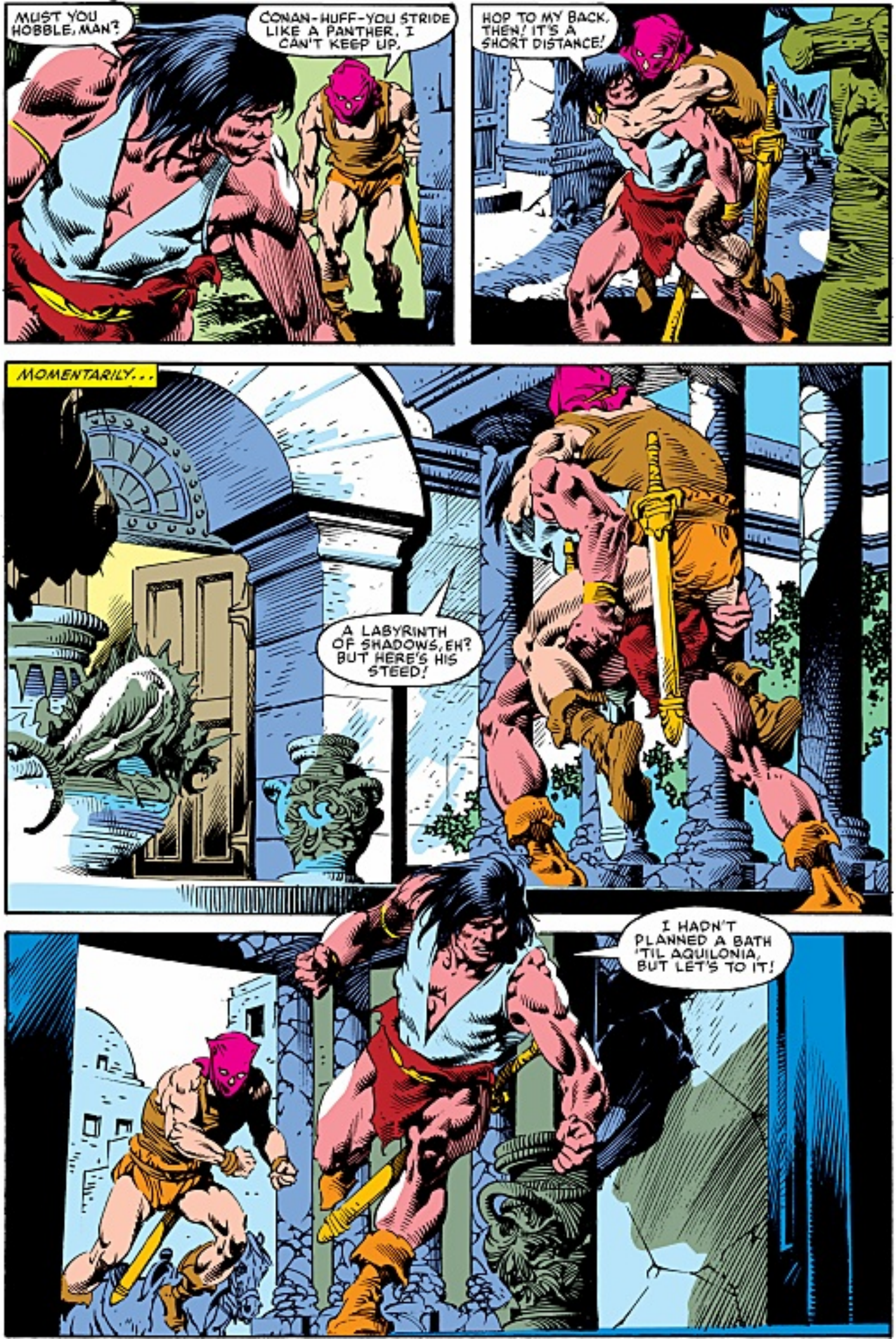
AND THUS, WITH A BLOW, THE FIERCE DRAGON IS DEAD!

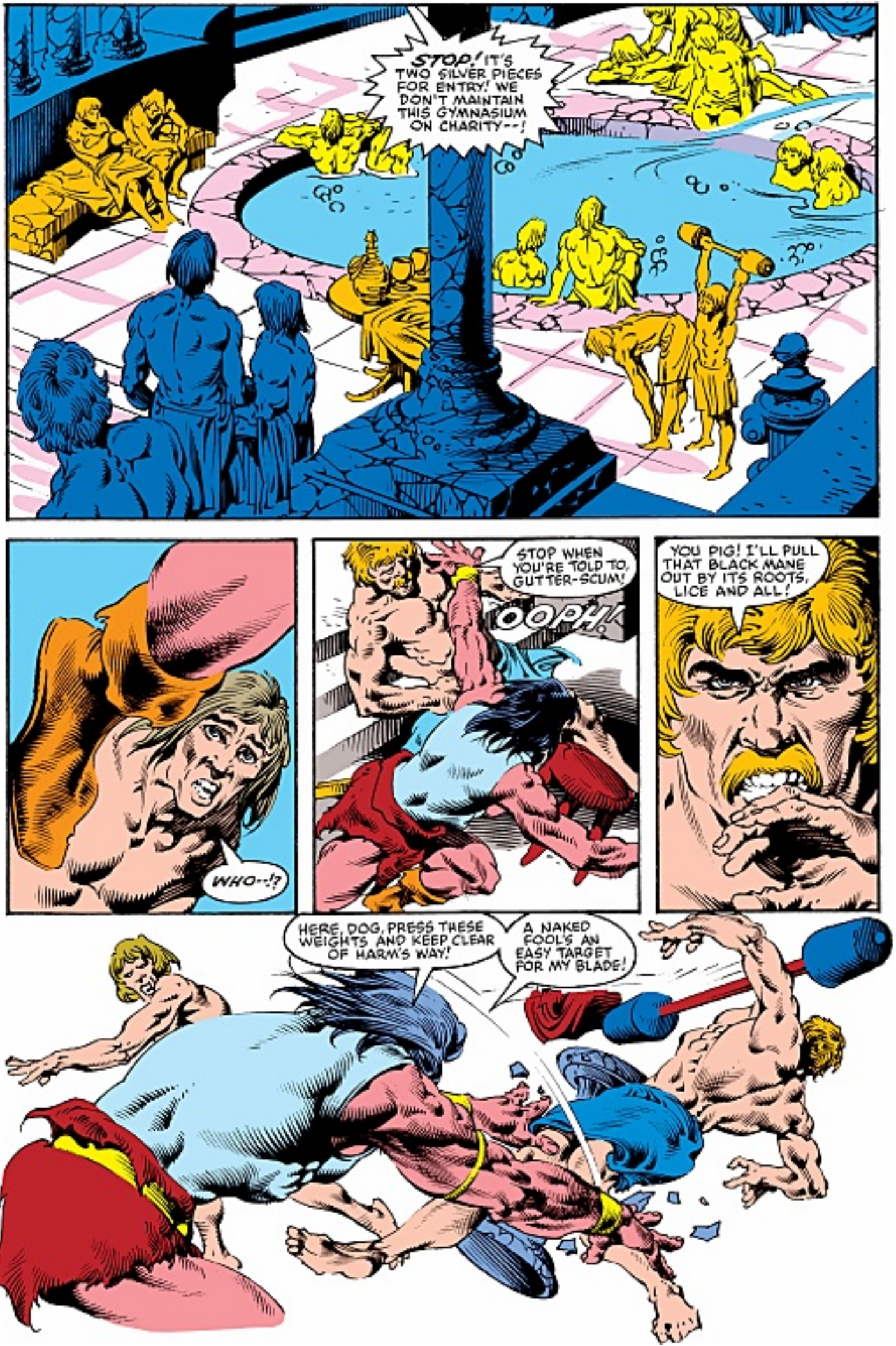
O, BRAVE KNIGHT, I OWE THEE MY LIFE!
THEN PROMISE WITHIN THE NEW MOON WE'LL BE WED!

HA! HA!
BY MITRA, I SHALL BE THY WIFE!
HOORAY

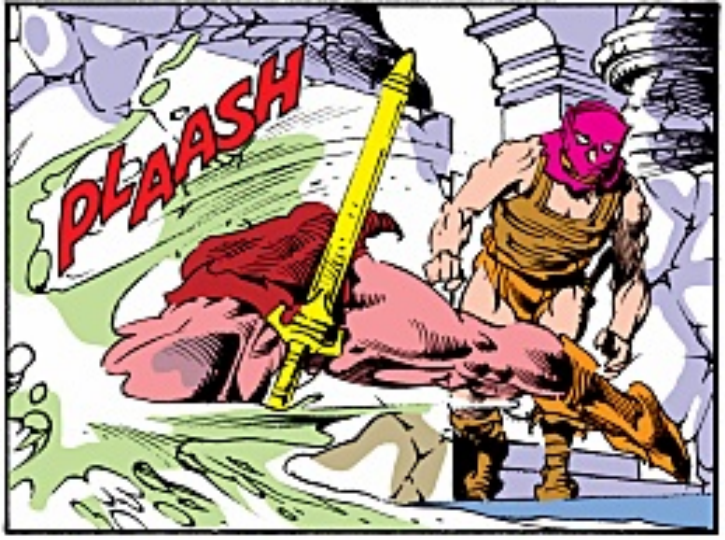
HA! I'D WON A LION'S SHARE OF WENCHES MYSELF STICKING A DRAGON OR TWO IN MY YOUTH!
NOT I, CONAN. NO SOFT-SKINNED CREATURE WOULD DARE SET EYES UPON THIS MONSTROUS FACE.
CROM! WHO CARES WHAT YOU LOOK LIKE UNDER THAT SACK?
YOU'VE A NOBLE HEART, MONTAGO, AND AFTER THIS NIGHT WE'LL FIND YOU A WORTHY WENCH, I WAGER.
WELL, THE CROWD DRAWS INDOORS FOR WINE AND ALE. I COULD DROWN MY OWN PARCHED THROAT IN A FEW SPICED TANKARDS.
WHAT'S KEEPING OUR DWARF?
GADUP GADUP
WHAT--!?

GADUP
GADUP
MONTAGO!
OOPH
FHWIT
SNIVELING SON OF A SCURVY SHE-DOG!
QUICK, MONTAGO, WE PASSED THAT WAY, EARLIER. THERE'S A *DEAD END* AT THE *BATHS*. WHOEVER THIS COWARD IS, HE CAN'T GO *FAR!*

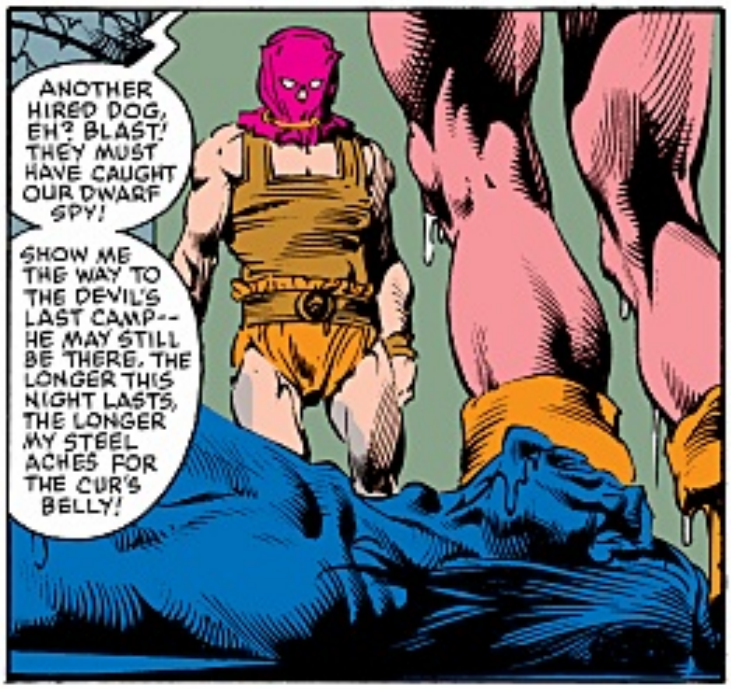

MUST YOU HOBBLE, MAN?
CONAN-HUFF-YOU STRIDE LIKE A PANTHER. I CAN'T KEEP UP.
HOP TO MY BACK, THEN! IT'S A SHORT DISTANCE!
MOMENTARILY...
A LABYRINTH OF SHADOWS, EH? BUT HERE'S HIS STEED!
I HADN'T PLANNED A BATH 'TIL AQUILONIA, BUT LET'S TO IT!

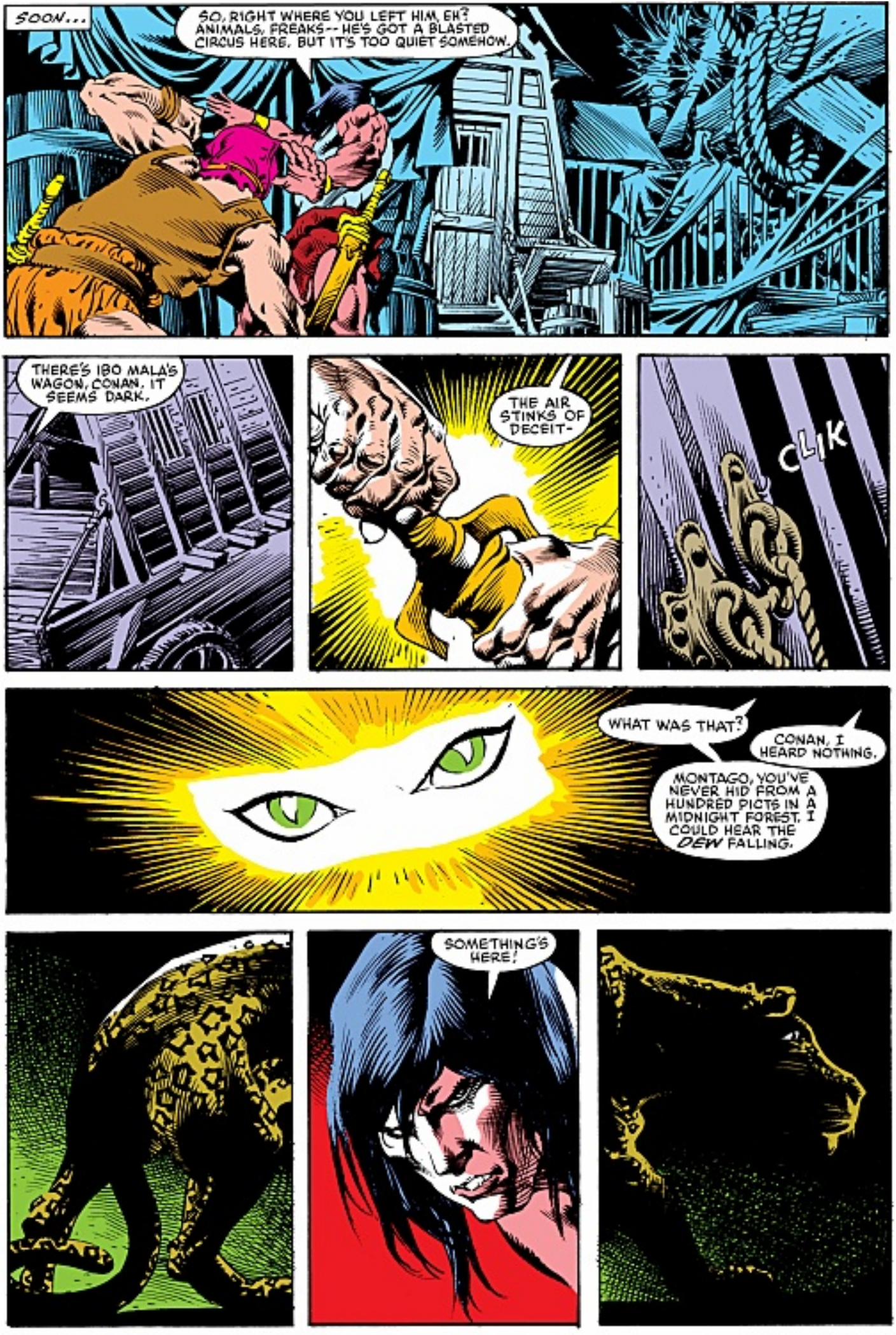

STOP! IT'S TWO SILVER PIECES FOR ENTRY! WE DON'T MAINTAIN THIS GYMNASIUM ON CHARITY--!
WHO--!?
STOP WHEN YOU'RE TOLD TO, GUTTER-SCUM!
OOPH!
YOU PIG! I'LL PULL THAT BLACK MANE OUT BY ITS ROOTS, LICE AND ALL!
HERE, DOG, PRESS THESE WEIGHTS AND KEEP CLEAR OF HARM'S WAY!
A NAKED FOOL'S AN EASY TARGET FOR MY BLADE!

THAT RED COAT, MONTAGO! OUR MYSTERIOUS ATTACKER CAN ONLY BE...

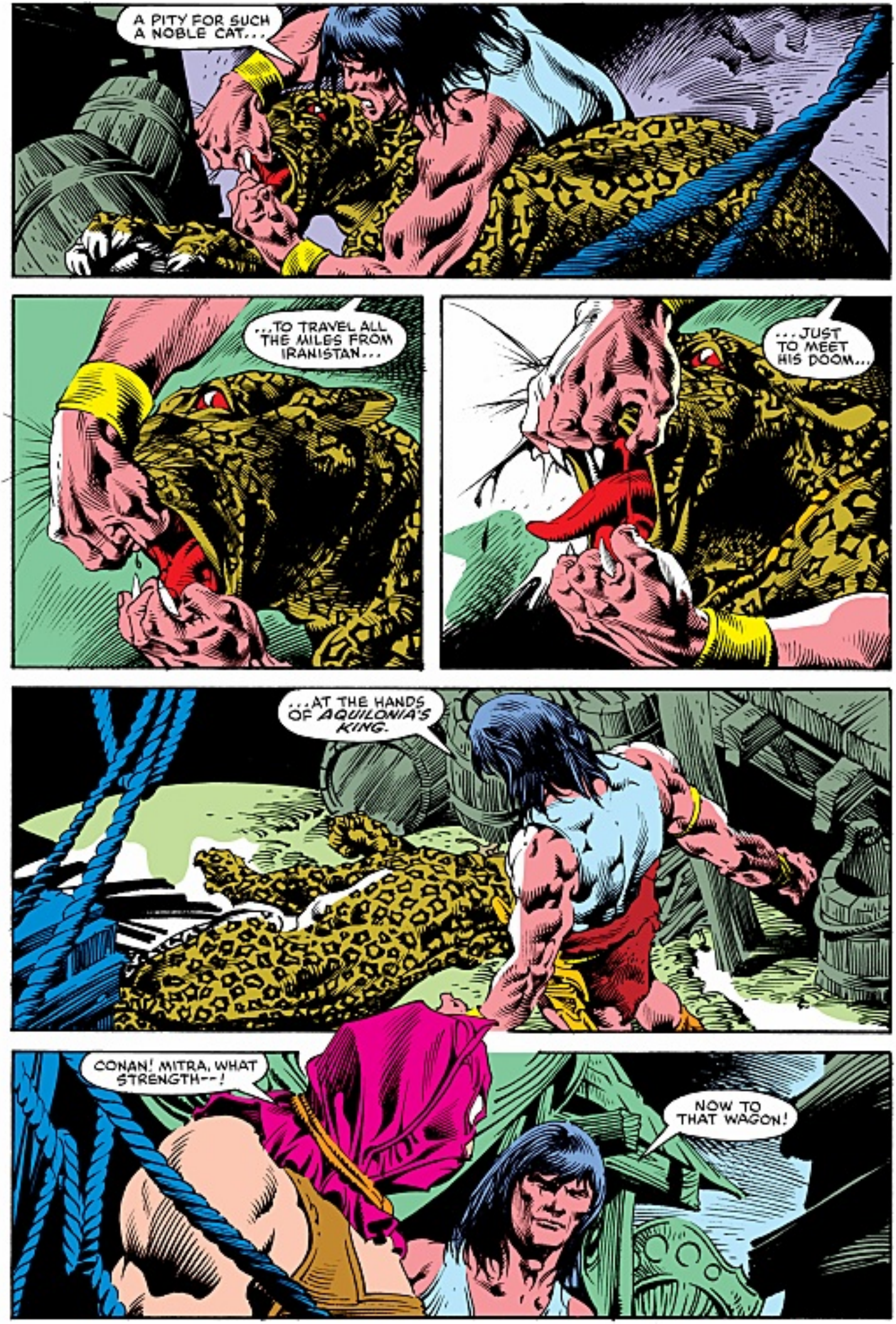

PLAASH

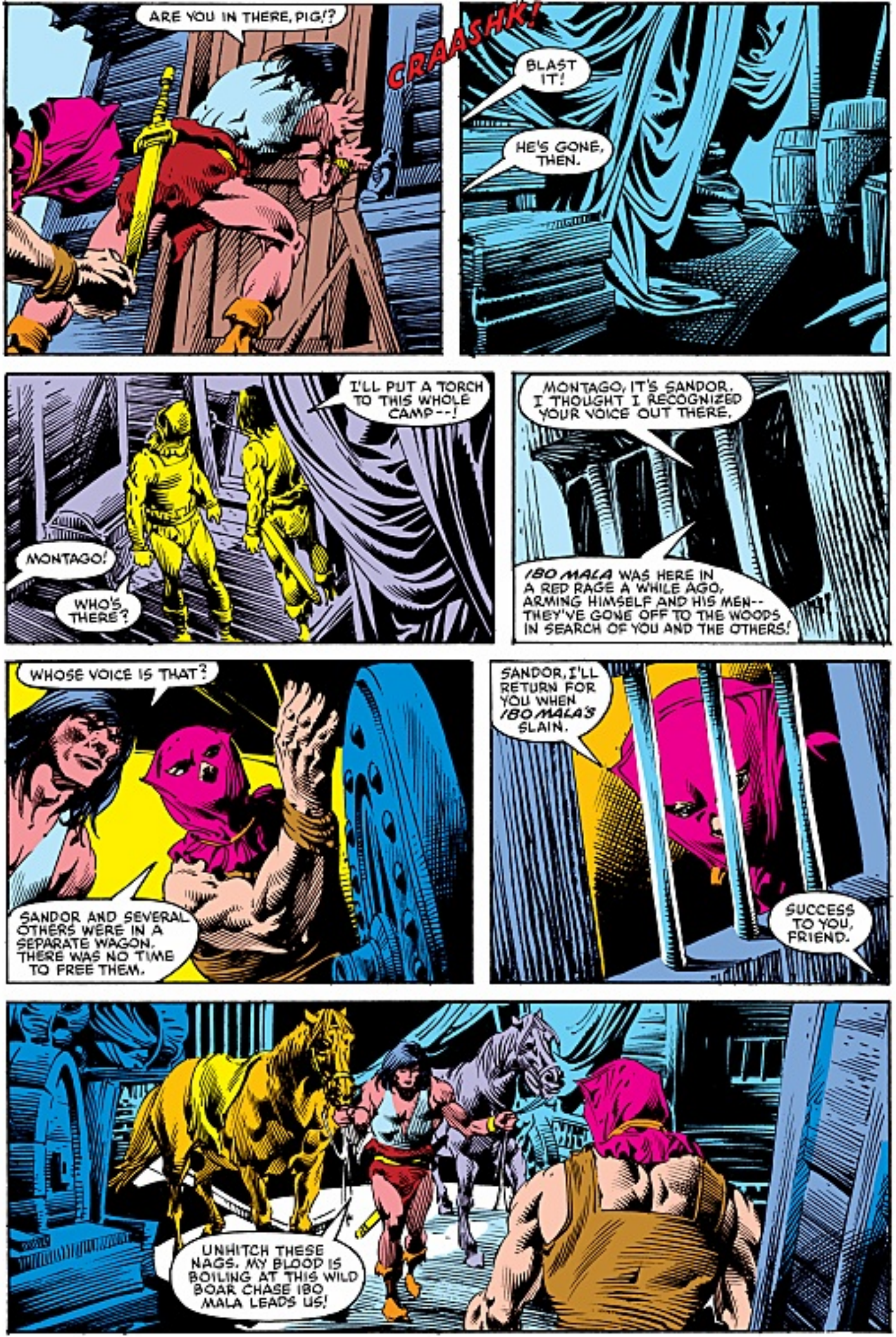
I'D HAVE PREFERRED HIM WITH A WAGGING TONGUE ABLE TO TELL US --
IT'S ONE OF 180 MALA'S MEN.


ANOTHER HIRED DOG, EH? BLAST! THEY MUST HAVE CAUGHT OUR DWARF SPY!
SHOW ME THE WAY TO THE DEVIL'S LAST CAMP-- HE MAY STILL BE THERE. THE LONGER THIS NIGHT LASTS, THE LONGER MY STEEL ACHES FOR THE CUR'S BELLY!


SOON...
SO, RIGHT WHERE YOU LEFT HIM, EH? ANIMALS, FREAKS-- HE'S GOT A BLASTED CIRCUS HERE. BUT IT'S TOO QUIET SOMEHOW.
THERE'S IBO MALA'S WAGON, CONAN. IT SEEMS DARK.
THE AIR STINKS OF DECEIT-
CLIK
WHAT WAS THAT?
CONAN, I HEARD NOTHING.
MONTAGO, YOU'VE NEVER HID FROM A HUNDRED PICTS IN A MIDNIGHT FOREST. I COULD HEAR THE DEW FALLING.
SOMETHING'S HERE!

A CHEETAH! MONTAGO, OUT OF THE WAY!
TSSSS!
UNHH!
SKRIT!
HA! THERE'S WHERE I WANT YOU, SPOTTED FURY!


A PITY FOR SUCH A NOBLE CAT...
...TO TRAVEL ALL THE MILES FROM IRANISTAN...
...JUST TO MEET HIS DOOM...
...AT THE HANDS OF AQUILONIA'S KING.
CONAN! MITRA, WHAT STRENGTH--!
NOW TO THAT WAGON!


ARE YOU IN THERE, PIG!?
CRAASHK!
BLAST IT!
HE'S GONE, THEN.
I'LL PUT A TORCH TO THIS WHOLE CAMP--!
MONTAGO!
WHO'S THERE?
MONTAGO, IT'S SANDOR. I THOUGHT I RECOGNIZED YOUR VOICE OUT THERE.
IBO MALA WAS HERE IN A RED RAGE A WHILE AGO, ARMING HIMSELF AND HIS MEN-- THEY'VE GONE OFF TO THE WOODS IN SEARCH OF YOU AND THE OTHERS!
WHOSE VOICE IS THAT?
SANDOR AND SEVERAL OTHERS WERE IN A SEPARATE WAGON. THERE WAS NO TIME TO FREE THEM.
SANDOR, I'LL RETURN FOR YOU WHEN IBO MALA'S SLAIN.
SUCCESS TO YOU, FRIEND.
UNHITCH THESE NAGS. MY BLOOD IS BOILING AT THIS WILD BOAR CHASE IBO MALA LEADS US!

A WHILE LATER, IN THE FOREST...
HAVE YOU SMOKED OUT ALL THE SLAVERING DOGS!?
HERE ARE THE LAST OF THEM!
COFF
COUGH!
IBO MALA, WE ARE YOURS--!
BY JHIL'S HOLY GUT, YOU'LL NEVER RUN FROM ME AGAIN, SHACKLED SCUM!
SHWACK!
IBO MALA, THERE ARE HORSES COMING--!
SO, WE'VE FOUND IBO MALA, THE DEVIL OF DARFAR AT LAST, MONTAGO!

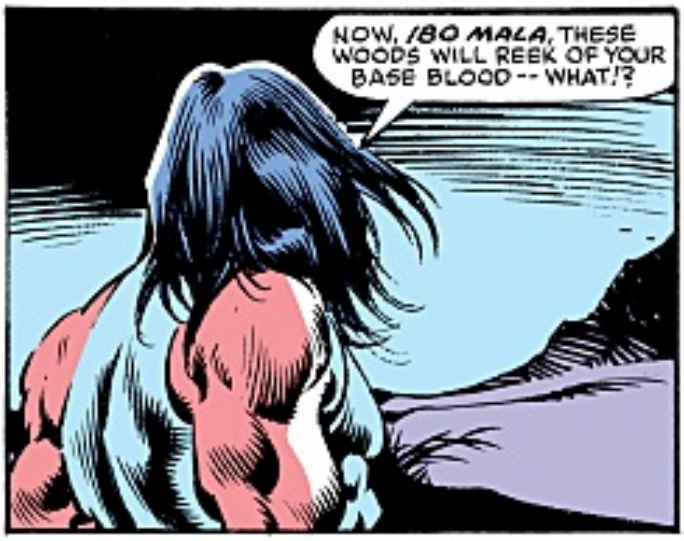
BLASPHEMER! DARE YOU UTTER IBO MALA'S NAME!?
I'VE A YARD OF COLD AQUILONIAN STEEL TO ANSWER THAT BLADE, SCUM!
BRING ME HIS TWISTED GUTS, DOGS!
HAI!

I'LL UNBOWEL YOUR WHINING PUPS FIRST, IBO MALA--
--AND THEN I'LL SCATTER YOU LIMB BY LIMB TO THE WINDS!
CONAN, I'VE STOOD BY WATCHING YOUR COURAGE LONG ENOUGH. I WILL ASSIST!
HO! WOULD YOU FLEE WITH YOUR TAIL BETWEEN YOUR LEGS LIKE A CRAVEN JACKAL!?
NEVER!
HNNH
UMPH

VERY WELL.
YOU... UNWASHED, ILLITERATE BARBARIAN SCUM! YOU AID IN THE DISSENSION OF MY GROTESQUES... YOU RUIN MY STANDING AMONG KINGS... THEN YOU DARE HOUND ME TO DAMNATION?!?
I KNOW NOT WHAT IN JHIL'S NAME I'VE EVER DONE TO YOU, STRANGER, BUT KNOW YE THIS...
... THE FIRE RAGING WITHIN MY BREAST IS ONE THAT KNOWS NEITHER HEIGHT NOR DEPTH, NOR SHALL IT EVER BE SATIATED BY LESS THAN YOUR STINKING CARCASS, DRIPPING RED BLOOD...
...FROM THE WAR-AXE OF IBO MALA!
HEAR ME, THEN:
IN THE YEARS SINCE I STOLE OUT OF MY VILLAGE IN CIMMERIA I HAVE DEVOTED MY LIFE TO NO CAUSE, NO KING, NO GOD...
...AND YET, IN MY YOUTHFUL PURSUIT OF SELF-GLORIFICATION NEVER ONCE HAVE I ENSLAVED OTHERS... NO MAN DID I WANTONLY SLAY!
WERE IT NOT FOR THE DEATH OF MY STEED... WERE IT NOT FOR YOUR RED JACKAL'S ATTEMPT ON MY LIFE; HAD OUR PATHS NEVER CROSSED, STILL WOULD I CHAMPION THE CAUSE OF THOSE MISFORTUNATES WITHIN YOUR GRASP.
SO KNOW YOU, DEVIL, THE LIBERATOR OF YOUR SLAVES... THE SWIFT VENGEANCE OF THOSE YOU'VE OPPRESSED... YOUR RED DEATH IS...
...CONAN, KING OF AQUILONIA!

--FOR THE DEATH OF WHITE TEMPEST...
...FOR THE BLOOD OF YOUR GROTESQUES...
...AND FOR THE DAMNABLE DECEIT OF THIS BLACK NIGHT!
OOPH
HA! PRAY TO YOUR DEMON GOD JHIL, PIG!

NO!
SINCE THE ASSASSIN HORSEMAN I HIRED AND THE CHEETAH I SET FREE DID NOT SUCCEED IN KILLING YOU, I SHALL DO SO MYSELF!
CONAN! YOU'VE SAVED ME MORE THAN ONCE THIS NIGHT--
I'LL-- AARGH!
MONTAGO!
BLAST YOU, DWARF! I'LL DASH YOUR BRAINS ON THE GROUND!



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THE MARC SILVESTRI INTERVIEW

...didn't quite work out. What was supposed to go here, next to this set of in-production pencil work from **KING CONAN #19**, was an interview I conducted with **Marc** over the phone sometime last March. Ma Bell changed all that. You see, **Marc** hails from Chicago, Illinois. This editor, firmly ensconced within the wilds of New York City, punched up **Marc's** number, and was presented with a connection that was somewhat... well... it went like this...

JIM OWSLEY: *So, Marc, how did you get your start in comics?*

MARC SILVESTRI: Buzz, frazzle-frazzle squawk crackle fizz.

J.O.: *And who, specifically are your influences?*

M.S.: Whoozat, frazzle frazzle buzz fizz Crackle Vhoot!

J.O.: *You're pulling my leg, right?*

M.S.: Zno! Crackle Vhoot!

J.O.: *Really? **The** Crackle Vhoot...?*

Well, you get the point. Reach out and confuse someone. Anyway, the Dreaded Deadline Doom loomed ever nearer, so I was forced to scrap the interview, and instead here I am again yacking away like last time. As usual, I am not at a loss for words...

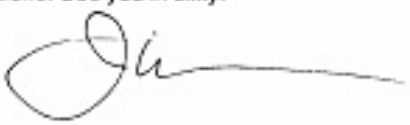
A couple of interesting things are coming up next issue; not the least of which is penciler **Marc Silvestri's** return to these pages. Having fully recovered from post-Dreaded Deadline Doom neurosis, **Marc** has turned in some of the best work of his career. The coming major changes in **KING CONAN**'s direction has fired a new spark in **Marc's** creative inertia, and next issue he explodes all over these pages with a fresh concept and a new approach. **KING CONAN** has *never* looked better. Add to this the debut of new inker **Mike Gustovich** (you've seen his work on **THE NEW MUTANTS**), and what you're left with is, well, in a word, **awesome**. Please don't drool on the pages.

Speaking of drooling, check out **Marc's** breathtaking rendition of Queen Zenobia. She's got to be the foxiest kidnap victim Stan Lee's ever presented. You see, a band of pirates kidnap Zenobia and hold her for ransom. Not too bright, eh? Considering the yet-uncivilized barbarian king hot on the abductor's trail has absolutely no intention of paying the pirates. Not *gold*, anyway. Don't miss this one, folks. Stake out your local store now. Try setting up an inconspicuous tent nearby and clock the delivery truck. You'll be glad you did.

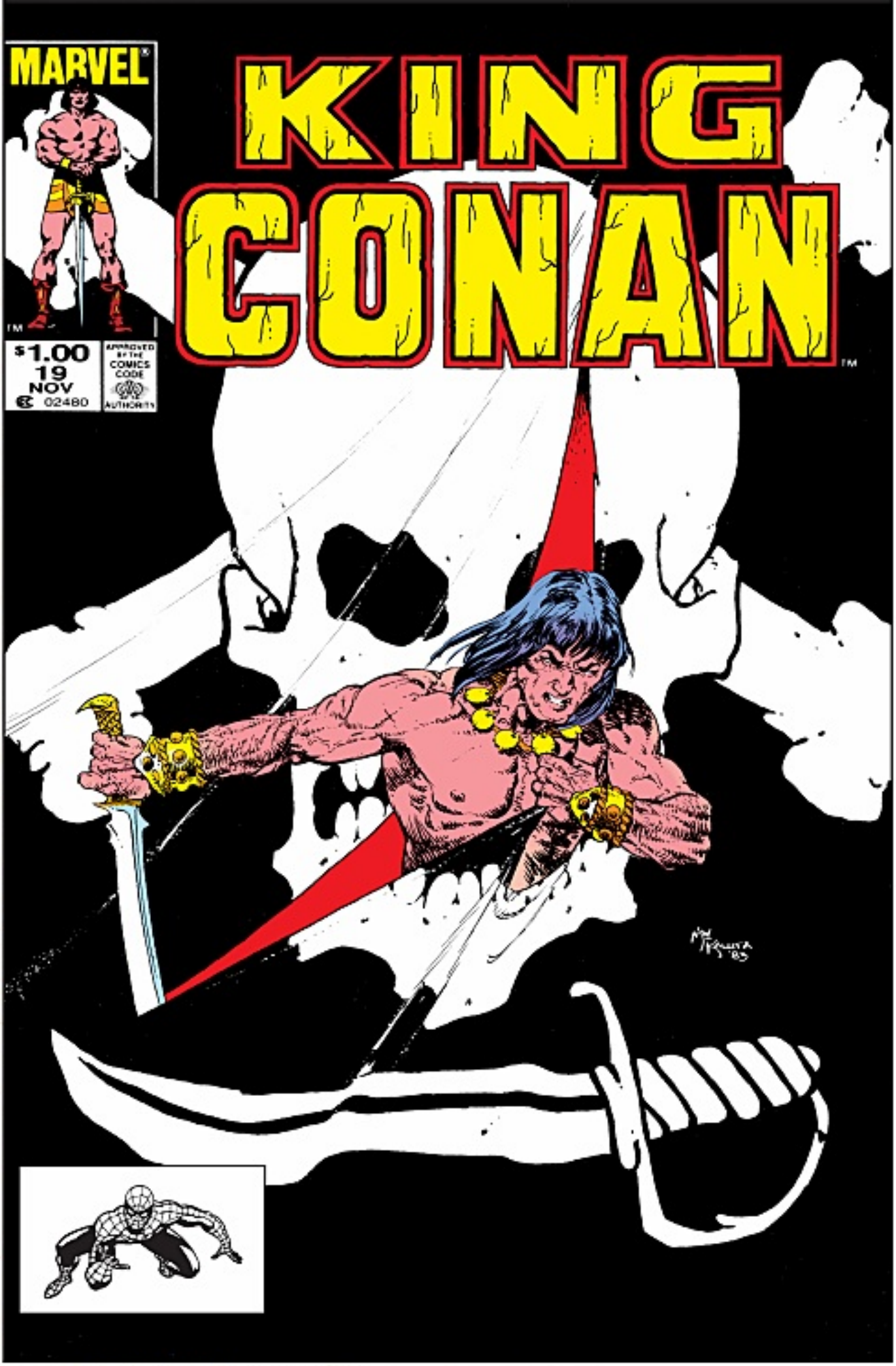
Another interesting thing about **KING CONAN #19** is it marks the return of your comments and critiques to this column. Yes, we're bringing back a *letters* page. You send 'em, we print 'em. That's the deal. Start flooding your local post office now.

Michael Fleisher and **John Buscema** are really getting around this month. **CONAN #150's** "Tower Of Flame" features an eerie tale of the supernatural with Mr. **Ernie Chan** as the finisher. Meanwhile, **SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN #91** features a Hyborian war story called "Forest Of Fiends". It features the much-demanded return of **Pablo Marcos** as finisher/dilineator, and a painting by **Mike Kaluta**. Oh, incidentally, **SAVAGE SWORD #91** also carries a backup story or two written by none other than yours truly.

Well, I'd better muzzle it for now. Suffice it to say that if you've never been into sword and sorcery before; if you've never thought a barbarian book was for you, we're out to prove you dead wrong. . This is *still* the Marvel Age of comics. All other comics eat quiche. See you in sixty.



Oh, by the way, I still can't talk about **KING CONAN #20**. However, I can tell you *when* I will be able to talk about this landmark, ground-breaking event... next issue. In the meantime, start setting up those tents.



COVER PENCILER & INKER: MICHAEL W. KALUTA

"Know, O prince, that the man called Conan was all things in his day: a thief, a reaver, a slayer... fierce sellsword and fiercer pirate... and finally, usurper king of proud, civilized Aquilonia, mightiest of Hyborian kingdoms... with his queen Zenobia at his side, and his son Prince Conn ripe to carry on the legend..."

—*The Nemedian Chronicles.*

Stan Lee PRESENTS: **KING CONAN**

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By *ROBERT E. HOWARD*

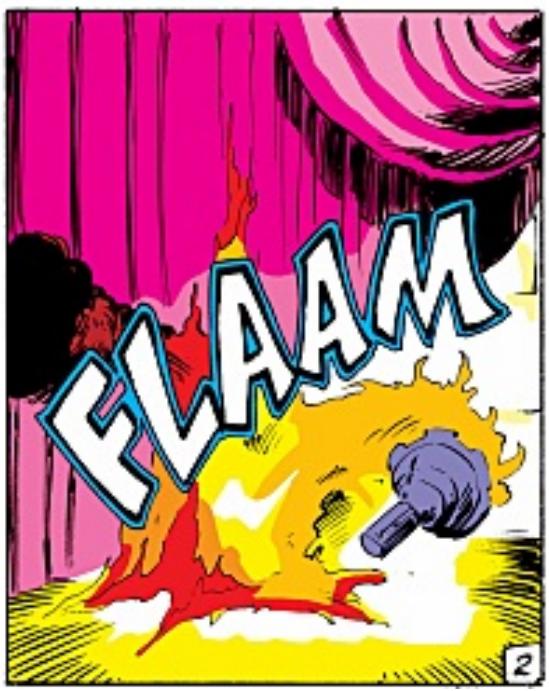
BONES AND A BLADE

NOW THERE'S A PRIZE'LL BRING IRON BONES' LEATHER BAGS BULGING WITH GOLD!
IN MITRA'S SACRED NAME, MY LADY, WHAT--?
FEAR NOT, ARIELA!

BUT NO-- MISTRESS!
HOW DARE YOU INTRUDE UPON THESE CHAMBERS?!

STAY BACK, YOU BRAZEN MONSTER FOR I AM ZENOBIA, CONAN'S QUEEN! IF AUGHT HARM BEFALL--

BOOZE ROT ME LIVER IF EVER A MILK-SKINNED WENCH WILL BAR ME WAY!


FLAAM
2

NO! I'LL NEVER YIELD!
RUN, ARIELA! SAVE YOURSELF!
YE WRIGGLE LIKE A HERRING IN A NET--
--BUT A GOOD SQUEEZE WILL KNOCK THE WIND FROM YE!
DEVIL! KING CONAN WILL PUT YOU TO THE SWORD FOR THIS!
LET ME GO-- Oh!
MMMMMMM-- IT'S BEEN SIX MOONS AND THEN SOME SINCE I HAD ME A WOMAN!
STOP IT! PLEASE!
HUH?
3

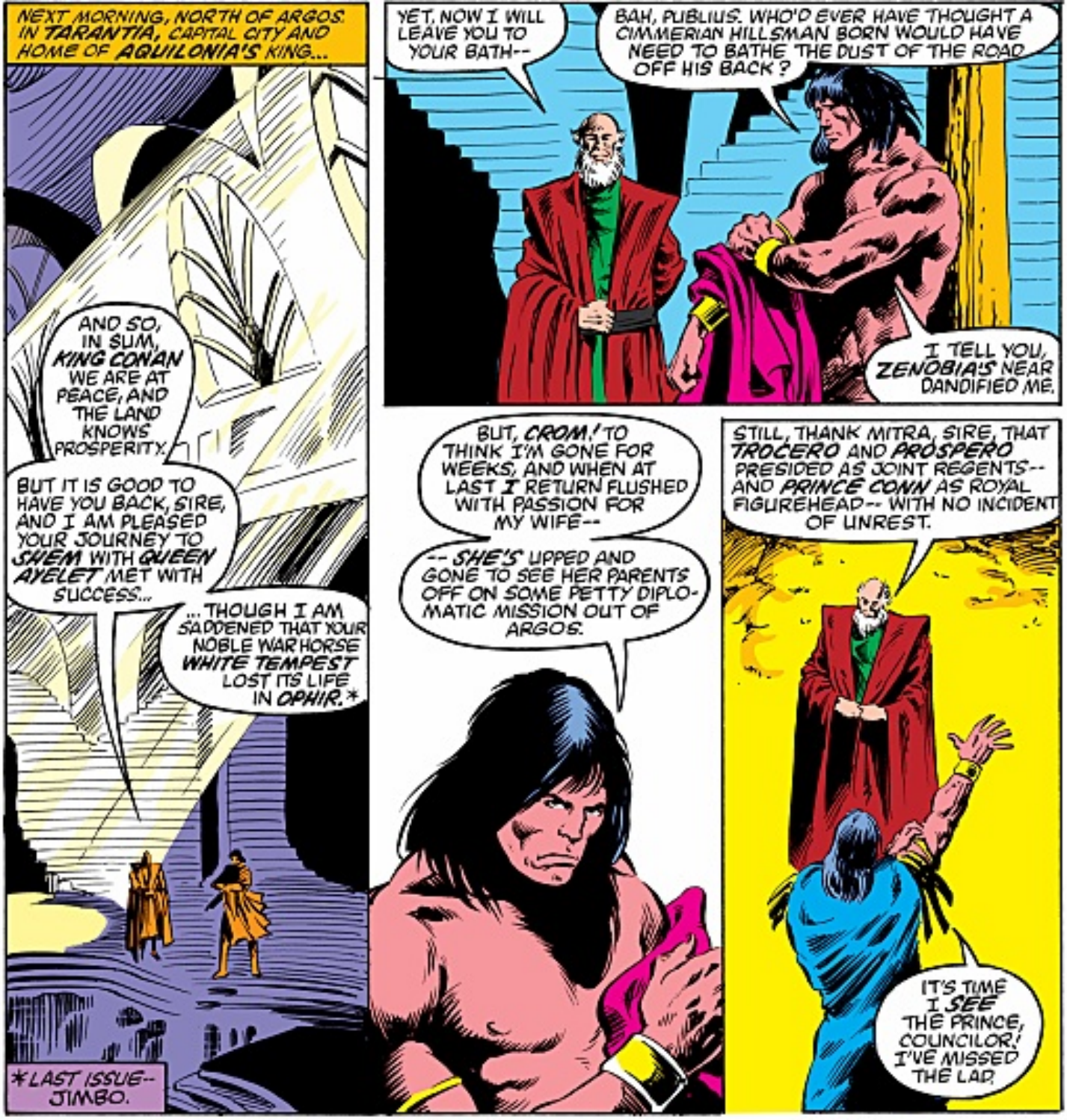
LEAVE THE GIRL GO!
YEAH, SURE, MATE... SURE, NESTOR.
TO YOUR SEA-HEELS, DOGS, AND LEAVE THE SNIVELING SLUT!
TELL CONAN NOTHIN' SHORT OF A QUEEN'S RANSOM-- AYE, GOLD AND SILVER BARS STACKED LIKE CORDWOOD--WILL REGAIN HIM HIS WENCH!
WHEN THE LUBBER'S READY TO STRIKE A DEAL, LET HIM SEEK IRON BONES UNDER THE SIGN OF BONES AND A BLADE!
MY LADY!
TO THE SHIP-- AND BLAST YOUR CAUTION!
THERE'S NOT A LIVING GUARD LEFT IN THE FORT OF NAPOLIA'S GARRISON!
4

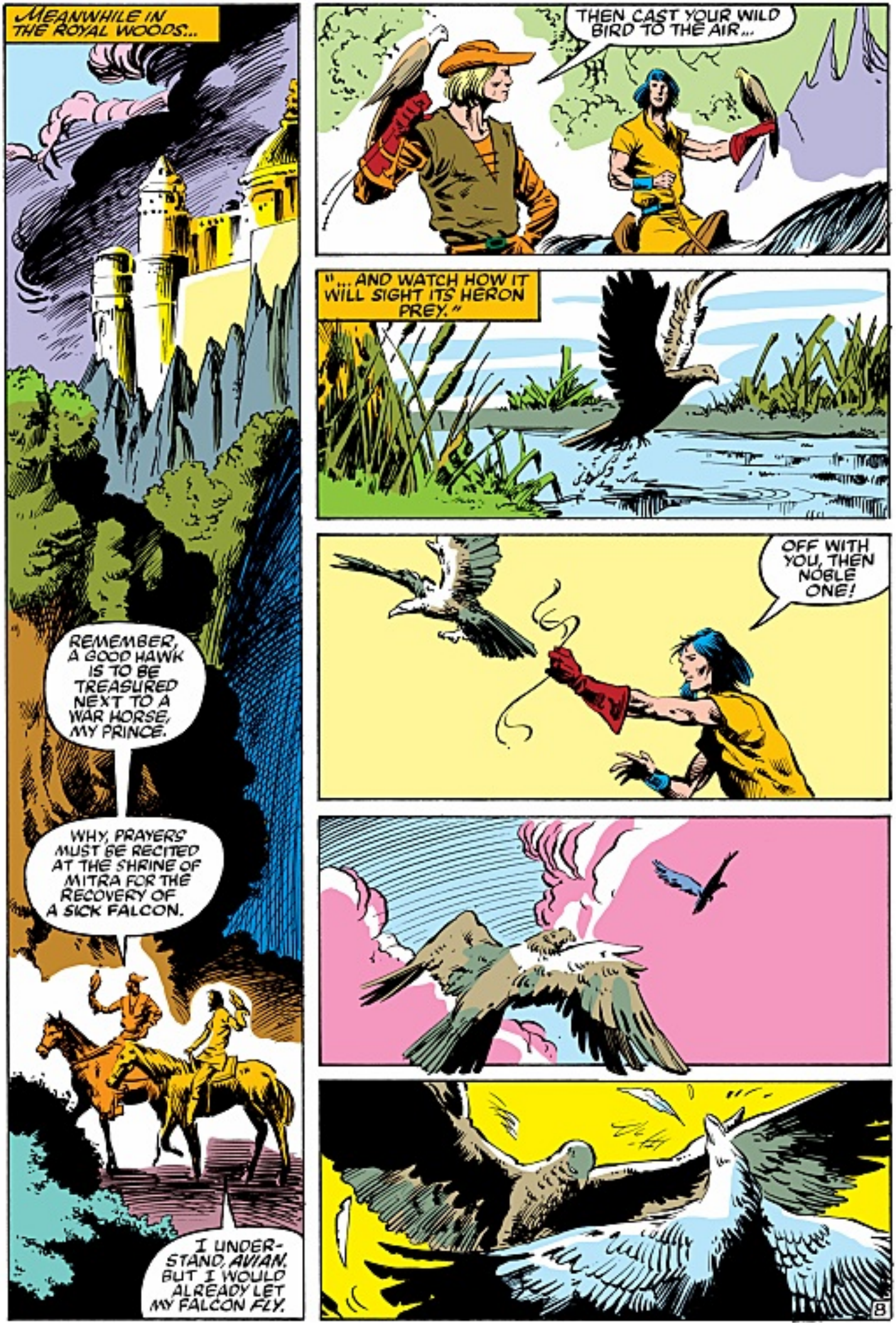
AYE, OUR BLADES HAVE DRUNK THEIR FILL OF LANDMEN'S BLOOD THIS NIGHT!
WELL, HANG ME FROM THE YARDARM IF OUR PRETTY BAGGAGE DOESN'T BRING A HOLDFUL OF TREASURE TO STIR THE GREEN ENVY OF EVERY FREEBOOTER ON THE WESTERN SEA.
5

NOW BEND TO IT, YE PACK OF SEA-RATS!

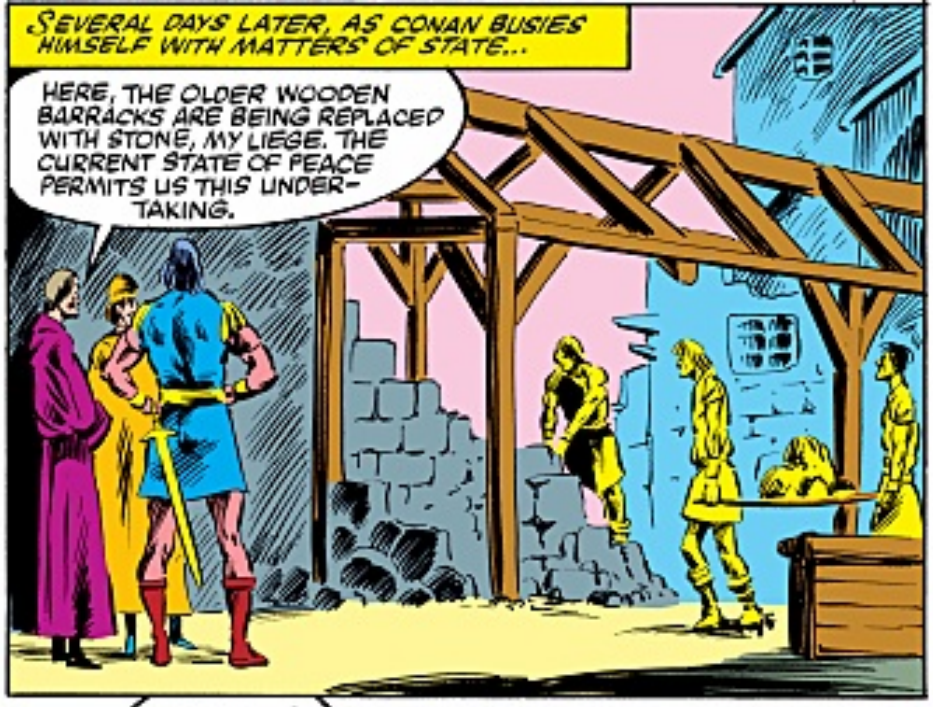
WHERE... WHERE AM I?
YE'RE BIDDIN' ARGOS FAREWELL, MISSY, TO GO ROVIN' WITH US'N.

MITRA, PROTECT ME!


NEXT MORNING, NORTH OF ARGOS. IN TARANTIA, CAPITAL CITY AND HOME OF AQUILONIA'S KING...
AND SO, IN SUM, KING CONAN WE ARE AT PEACE, AND THE LAND KNOWS PROSPERITY.
BUT IT IS GOOD TO HAVE YOU BACK, SIRE, AND I AM PLEASED YOUR JOURNEY TO SHEM WITH QUEEN AYELET MET WITH SUCCESS...
... THOUGH I AM SADDENED THAT YOUR NOBLE WAR HORSE WHITE TEMPEST LOST ITS LIFE IN OPHIR.*
*LAST ISSUE-- JIMBO.
YET, NOW I WILL LEAVE YOU TO YOUR BATH--
BAH, PUBLIUS. WHO'D EVER HAVE THOUGHT A CIMMERIAN HILLSMAN BORN WOULD HAVE NEED TO BATHE THE DUST OF THE ROAD OFF HIS BACK?
I TELL YOU, ZENOBIA'S NEAR DANDIFIED ME.
BUT, CROM! TO THINK I'M GONE FOR WEEKS, AND WHEN AT LAST I RETURN FLUSHED WITH PASSION FOR MY WIFE--
-- SHE'S UPPED AND GONE TO SEE HER PARENTS OFF ON SOME PETTY DIPLOMATIC MISSION OUT OF ARGOS.
STILL, THANK MITRA, SIRE, THAT TROCERO AND PROSPERO PRESIDED AS JOINT REGENTS-- AND PRINCE CONN AS ROYAL FIGUREHEAD-- WITH NO INCIDENT OF UNREST.
IT'S TIME I SEE THE PRINCE, COUNCILOR! I'VE MISSED THE LAD.
LET ME REGARD TODAY'S PROGRAM... ...ah, YES, PRINCE CONN WOULD BE WITH AVIAN, THE COURT FALCONER.
I SPORT ENOUGH OPHIR-SPUN FINERY TO PLAY AT BEING CIVILIZED--HOLD OFF THE STIFLING ROBES OF STATE!
I'M OFF TO JOIN MY SON.
7


MEANWHILE IN THE ROYAL WOODS...
REMEMBER, A GOOD HAWK IS TO BE TREASURED NEXT TO A WAR HORSE, MY PRINCE.
WHY, PRAYERS MUST BE RECITED AT THE SHRINE OF MITRA FOR THE RECOVERY OF A SICK FALCON.
I UNDERSTAND, AVIAN. BUT I WOULD ALREADY LET MY FALCON FLY.
THEN CAST YOUR WILD BIRD TO THE AIR...
"...AND WATCH HOW IT WILL SIGHT ITS HERON PREY."
OFF WITH YOU, THEN NOBLE ONE!
8

TWEEEEEEE
THE WHISTLE RECALLS YOUR BIRD, MY PRINCE. I TRUST ITS CATCH WILL GRACE THE ROYAL DINNER BOARD.
HO! I'LL TAKE THAT!
FATHER! WELCOME HOME!
THAT'S A HANDSOM HAWK PERCHES YOUR WRIST, CONN.
AYE! AND AS HANDSOME A BIRD YOU'VE HUNTED.
WHO--?!
BUT THEN, THE ROYAL FALCON WOULD HARDLY SEEK A SPARROW AS ITS QUARRY.
9


SEVERAL DAYS LATER, AS CONAN BUSIES HIMSELF WITH MATTERS OF STATE...
HERE, THE OLDER WOODEN BARRACKS ARE BEING REPLACED WITH STONE, MY LIEGE. THE CURRENT STATE OF PEACE PERMITS US THIS UNDER-TAKING.

KING CONAN!
THIS MESSENGER BEARS NEWS OF THE UTMOST URGENCY.

WELL...? SPIT IT OUT, MAN!
MY... MY... SOVEREIGN... MY LORD... THE QUEEN HAS BEEN... ABDUCTED!

CROM'S BLOOD! ZENOBIA?!

THE PIRATE, IRON BONES HOLDS HER FOR RANSOM ON THE WESTERN SEA NEAR THE BARACHAN ISLES!

HEADS WILL ROLL FOR THIS!
THAK

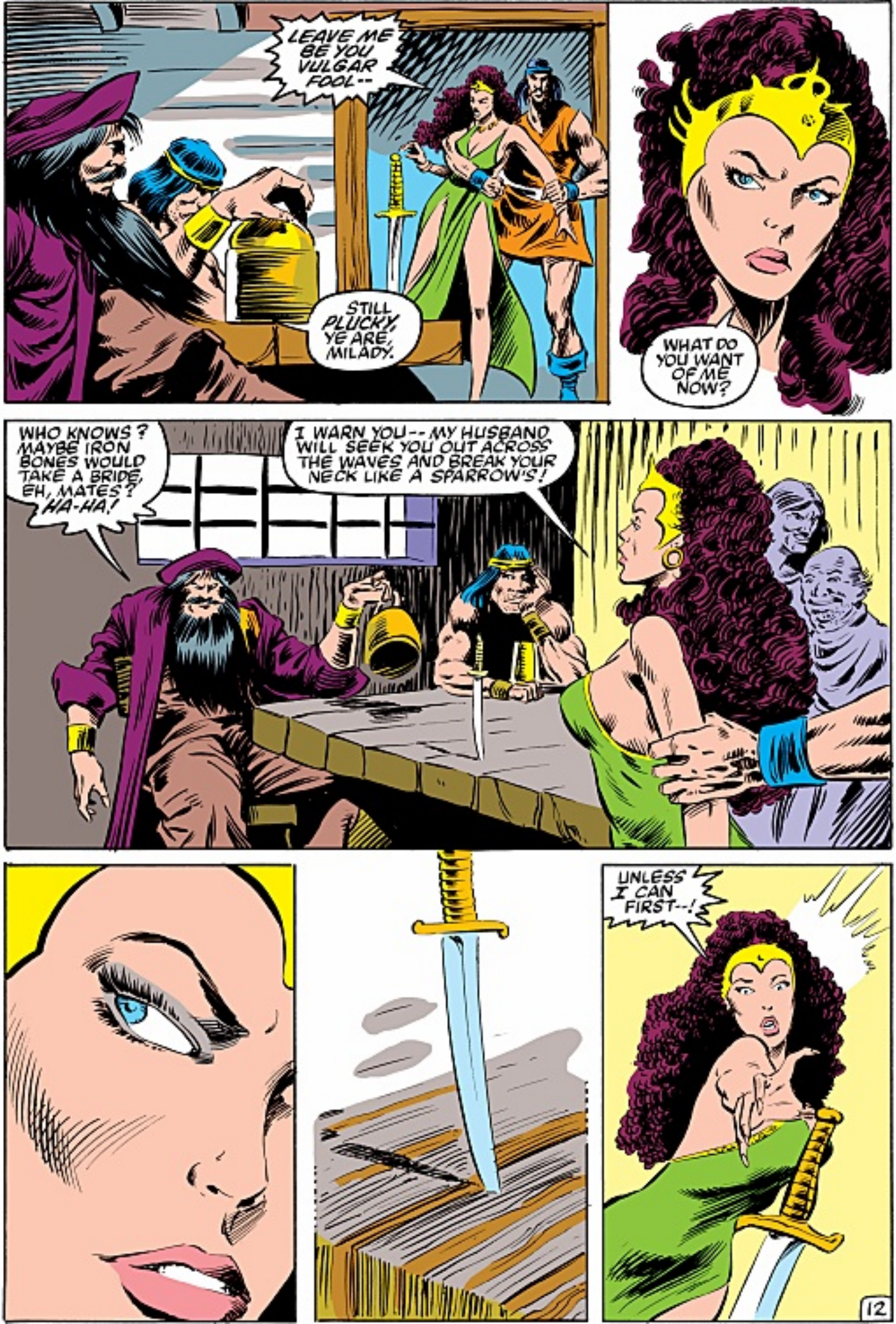
COUNCILOR PUBLIUS--TROCERO AND PROSPERO ARE REGENTS ONCE MORE UNTIL ZENOBIA AND I RETURN!
IF WE SHOULD NOT, THEN CONN'S YOUR NEW KING!

SEVERAL DAYS LATER, ON THE WESTERN OCEAN OFF THE BARACHAN ISLES...

♪ ROW, BULLIES, ROW THE WENCHES OF ARGOS 'AVE GOT US IN TOW! ♪
HA! SEVENS! YE'D BEST QUIT NOW, LEPUS, OR YE'LL WAGER YER BLOODY HAMMOCK NEXT AND FIND YERSELF SLEEPIN' ON THE BARE PLANKS.

'NOTHER BRIMMIN' BUMBER OF PUNCH! HA...!

... AND FETCH ME THE WENCH!

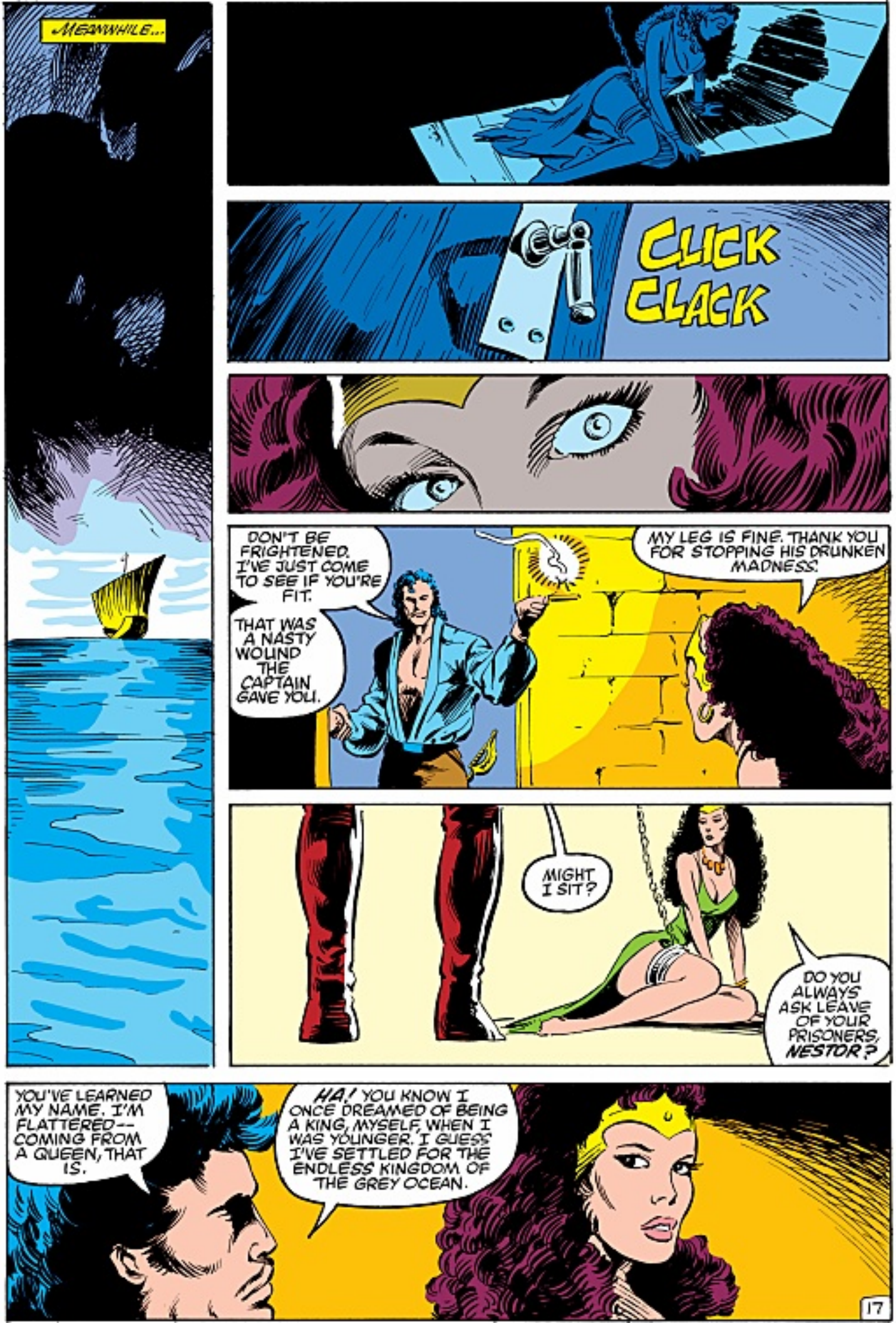

LEAVE ME BE YOU VULGAR FOOL--
STILL PLUCKY, YE ARE, MILADY.
WHAT DO YOU WANT OF ME NOW?
WHO KNOWS? MAYBE IRON BONES WOULD TAKE A BRIDE, EH, MATES? HA-HA!
I WARN YOU-- MY HUSBAND WILL SEEK YOU OUT ACROSS THE WAVES AND BREAK YOUR NECK LIKE A SPARROW'S!
UNLESS I CAN FIRST--!
12

HO! YE'RE A SPARK, YE ARE, WENCH!
BUT I THINK WE CAN SWEAT SOME OF THE...
...SPIRIT OUT OF YE!
LET'S SEE YE DANCE, QUEEN OF AQUILONIA!
SNIT
DANCE!
CHWT
DANCE!
13

DANCE!
OH, MY LEG!
STIT
HA HAHA HA HA HA H
NOW GET UP, ME BEAUTY, I SAYS, AND--
WHAT--?!
14

NESTOR?!
ENOUGH, CAPTAIN!
YOU BLOODY SEA-RAT, DO YE DARE--?!
IRON BONES, SHE'LL HARDLY CARRY A QUEEN'S RANSOM IF SHE'S DAMAGED--
Ohhh...
AYE, AYE-- TOO MUCH GROG TO DRINK'S GONE TO ME HEAD.
SHACKLE THE SHE-DOG IN THE HOLD!
15

AT THAT MOMENT, THE SEAPORT OF MESSANTIA, CAPITAL OF ARGOS...
WHICHEVER OF YOU DOGS IS MASTER OF THIS BUCKET, GET HER UNDER WAY!
BUT--
I SAID PUSH OFF!
OR I'LL FEED YOUR GIZZARD TO THE GULLS.
A-A-A-ALL HA-A-ANDS! UP ANCHOR, A-HO-OY!
BUT WHERE WOULD YOU SAIL?
THE OPEN OCEAN.
WE... WE NEVER VENTURE INTO PIRATE WATERS IT'S SAFER TO HUG THE SHORELINE.
NOW! YOU MISBEGOTTEN MONGREL!
AND HOIST THIS STANDARD TO THE WIND!
16


MEANWHILE...
CLICK CLACK
DON'T BE FRIGHTENED. I'VE JUST COME TO SEE IF YOU'RE FIT.
THAT WAS A NASTY WOUND THE CAPTAIN GAVE YOU.
MY LEG IS FINE. THANK YOU FOR STOPPING HIS DRUNKEN MADNESS.
MIGHT I SIT?
DO YOU ALWAYS ASK LEAVE OF YOUR PRISONERS, NESTOR?
YOU'VE LEARNED MY NAME. I'M FLATTERED-- COMING FROM A QUEEN, THAT IS.
HA! YOU KNOW I ONCE DREAMED OF BEING A KING, MYSELF, WHEN I WAS YOUNGER. I GUESS I'VE SETTLED FOR THE ENDLESS KINGDOM OF THE GREY OCEAN.

IT'S A FAR CRY FROM THE THRONE OF MY HOMELAND NEMEDIA.
THERE'S A COINCIDENCE-- NEMEDIA'S WHERE I GREW UP.
MY PARENTS WERE OF THE MINOR NOBILITY, FORCED TO FLEE BY THE TYRANT TARASCUS.
AYE, TARASCUS-- THAT SWINE ON THE THRONE IS WHAT DROVE ME TO SEA. THE LAND'S INTOLERABLE UNDER HIS YOKE.

I KNEW THE YOKE WELL. I WAS CAPTURED AND HELD PRISONER IN THE HAREM OF TARASCUS... UNTIL CONAN CAME, MY CHAMPION, AND CARRIED ME AWAY A FREE WOMAN AND HIS BRIDE.
I'M CERTAIN THAT EVEN NOW CONAN SAIL TO MY RESCUE.

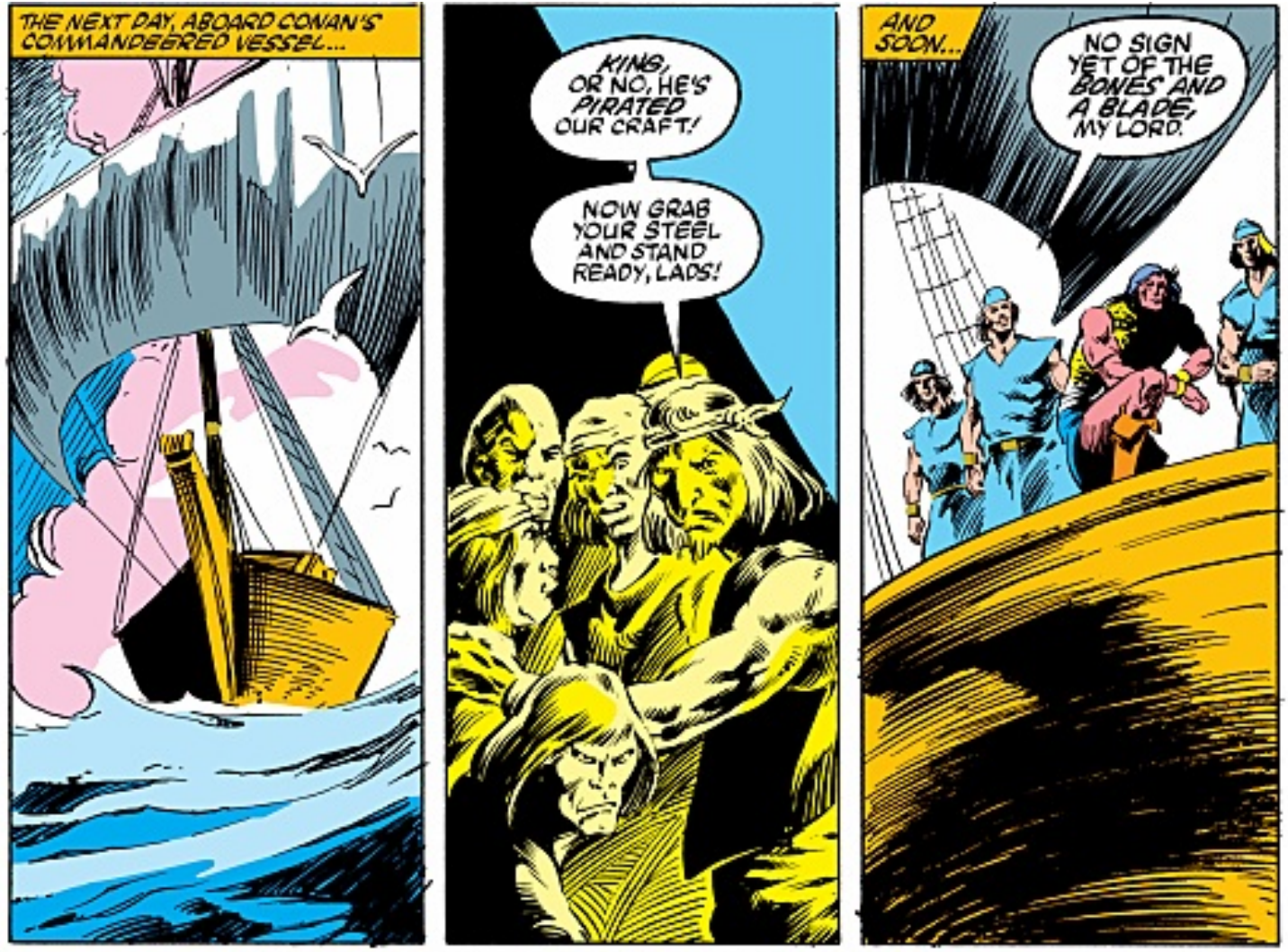
HE'D BE A BLIND FOOL WHO WOULDN'T RISK HIS ALL FOR A BEAUTY LIKE ZENOBIA.
BTUMP
THUMP
18

THAT'LL LEARN HIM TO PLAY FALSE THE BROTHERS OF THE COAST!

MERCY, IRON BONES!

LET THE SHARKS SHOW THE LIKES OF YE MERCY!
NO!

SURE, THE LAWS OF THE BROTHERHOOD WON'T ABIDE CHEATIN' YOUR FELLOW SHIPMATES AT THE DICE!


THE NEXT DAY, ABOARD CONAN'S COMMANDEERED VESSEL...
KING, OR NO, HE'S PIRATED OUR CRAFT!
NOW GRAB YOUR STEEL AND STAND READY, LADS!
AND SOON...
NO SIGN YET OF THE BONES AND A BLADE, MY LORD.

THIT
THIT
WHAT BLASTED--?!
WE VEER BACK TO PORT, OR--
CROM! A DEVILISH MUTINY, IS IT?
20

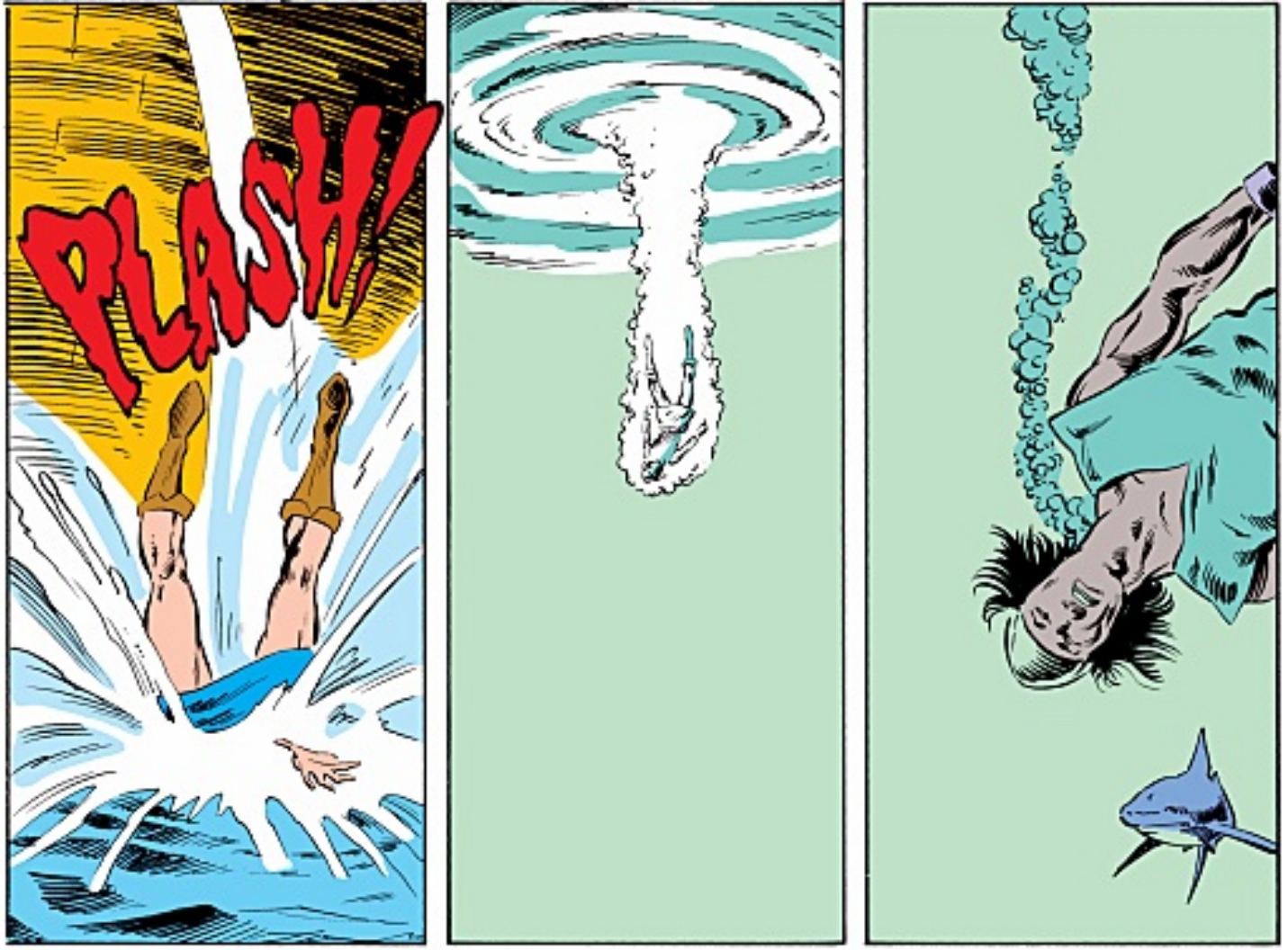
AYE, 'LESS YOU WANT TO YIELD WITHOUT A FIGHT.
YIELD?! HO, KNAVES, WE'LL SWAB THE DECKS WITH YOUR STINKING BLOOD--
--AND RAISE THE SAILS WITH YOUR GUTS AS HALYARDS!
NOW, WOULD YOU PUT A SHAFT IN MY BACK...
...WITH THAT UNMANLY BOW OF YOURS, YOU SON OF A SHE-DEVIL?
THIK
21

LET'S SEE IF YOUR AIM HOLDS AFTER I SPLIT THAT RAT-FACED SKULL OF YOURS!
CHUK
THAT KICK SHOULD HAVE THROWN YOU TO THE PLANKS--?!
THAK
MITRA! YOU SWING AND DODGE LIKE A BLASTED JUNGLE APE!

WHAAM!
THUD

CROM! THAT SWINE'S GOT ARIDES BACKED TO THE RAIL!

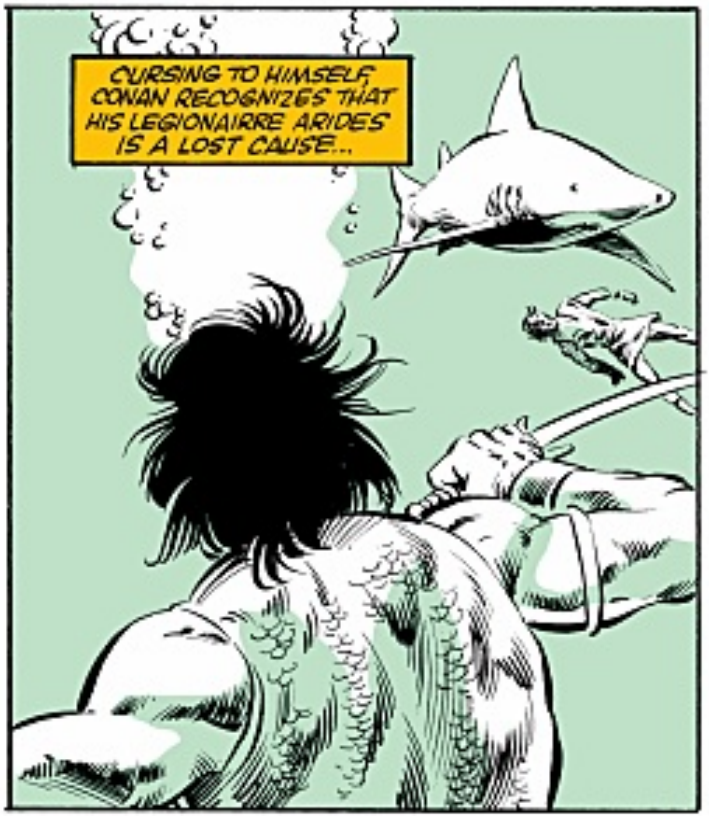
KLONK
OOPH!


PLASH!

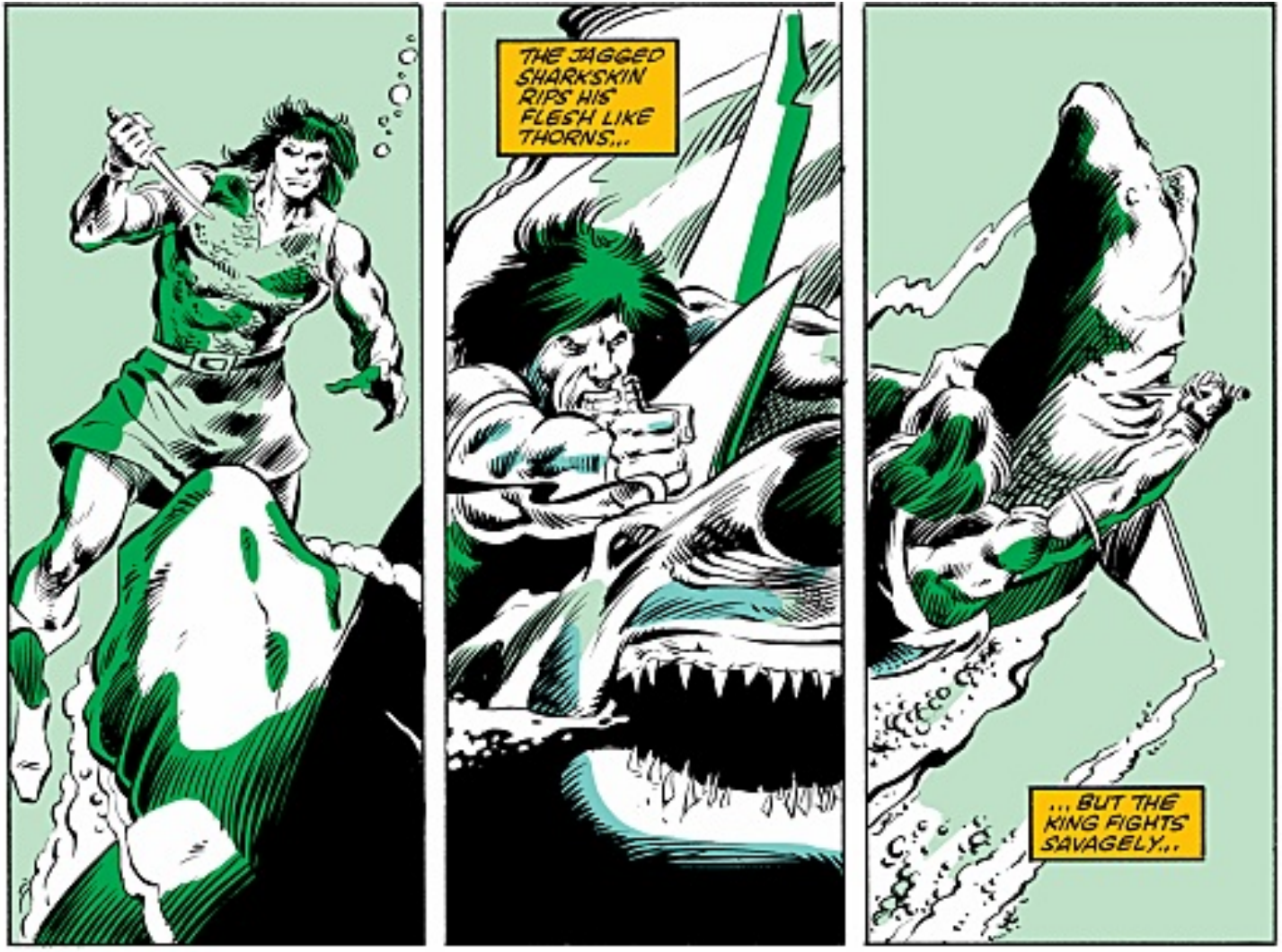
BLASTED BLACKGUARDRY!

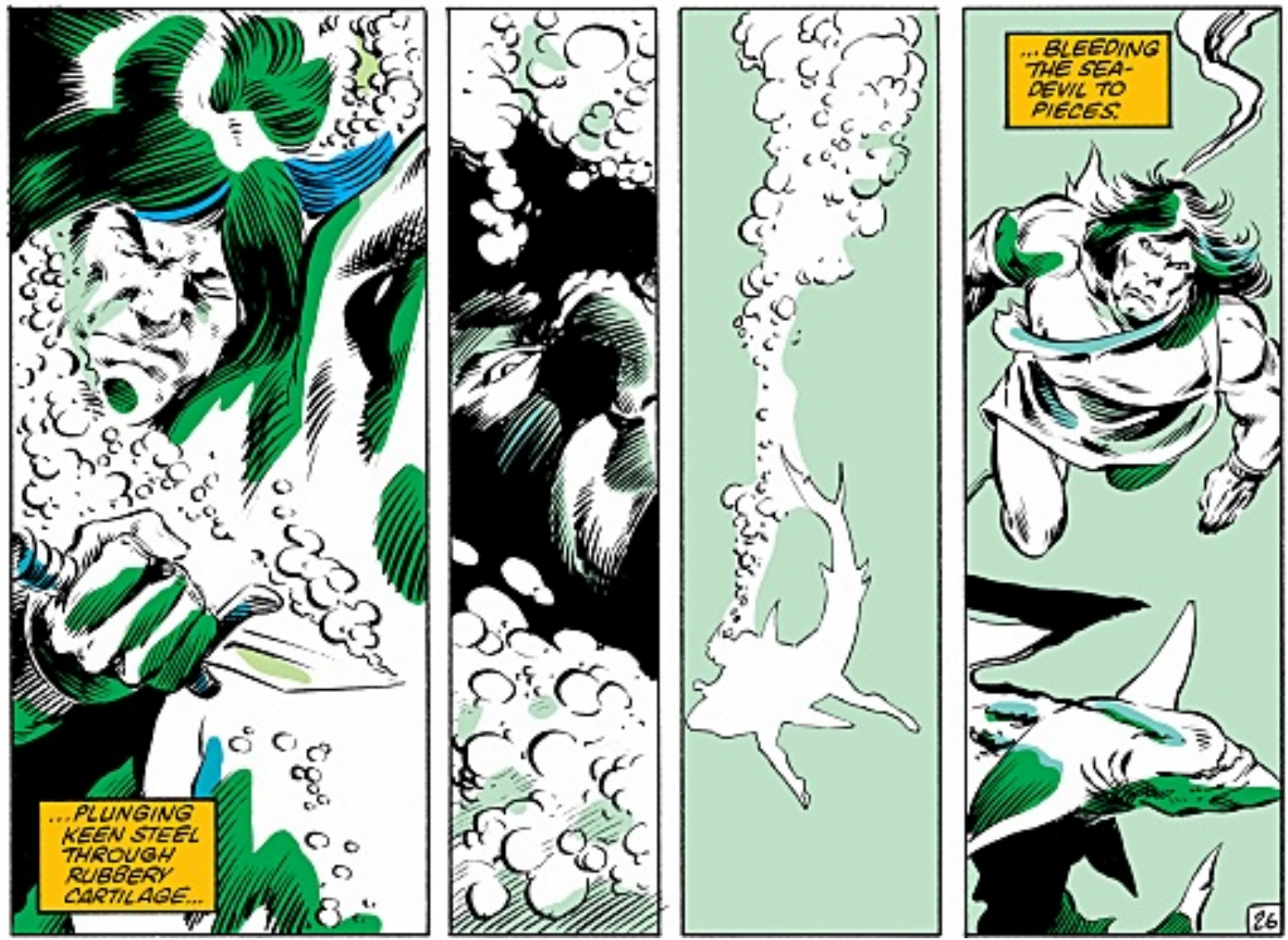
I'LL NOT LEAVE ARIDES TO THE COLD FATHOMS!

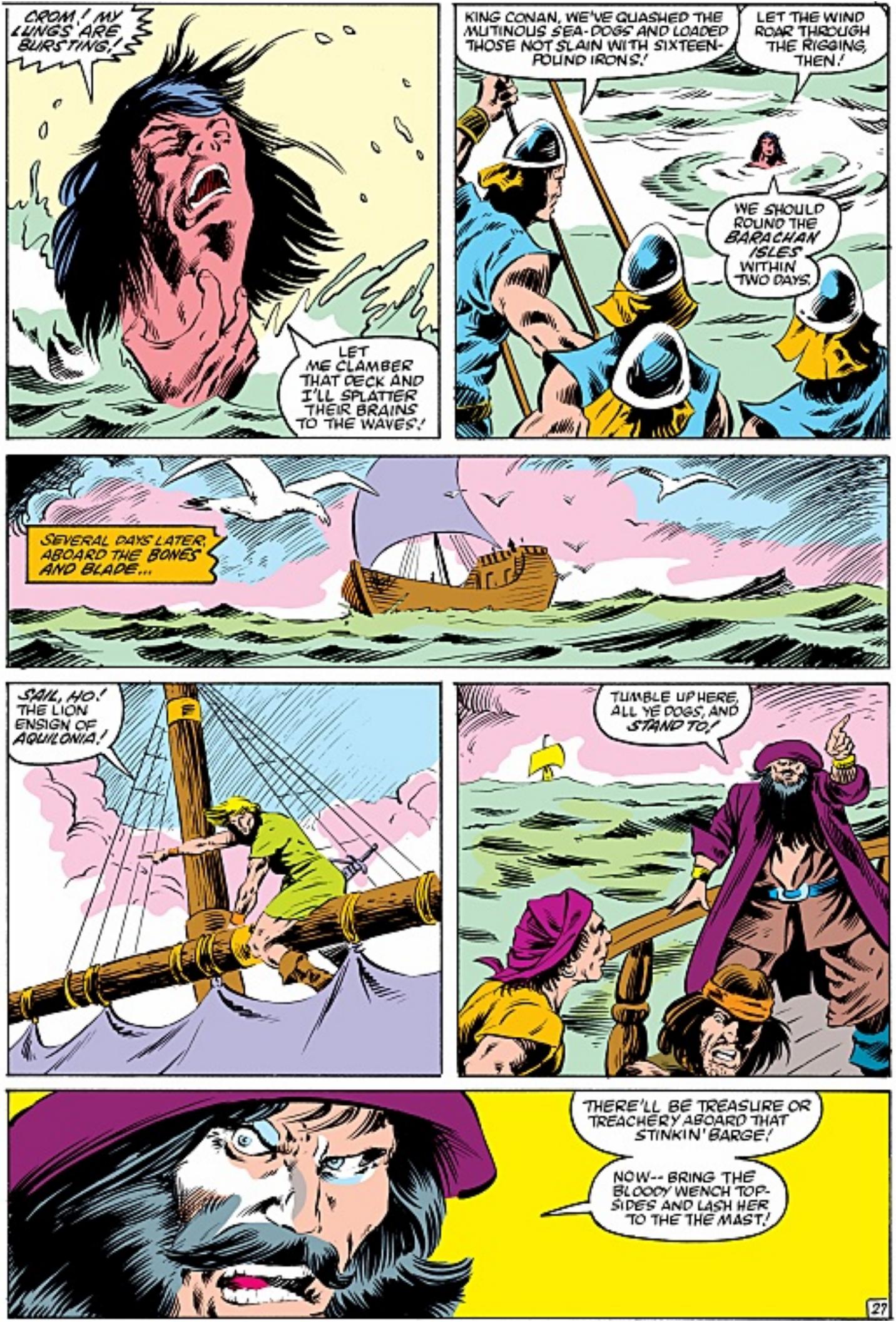
GRLAAGSH


CURSING TO HIMSELF, CONAN RECOGNIZES THAT HIS LEGIONAIRRE ARIDES IS A LOST CAUSE...

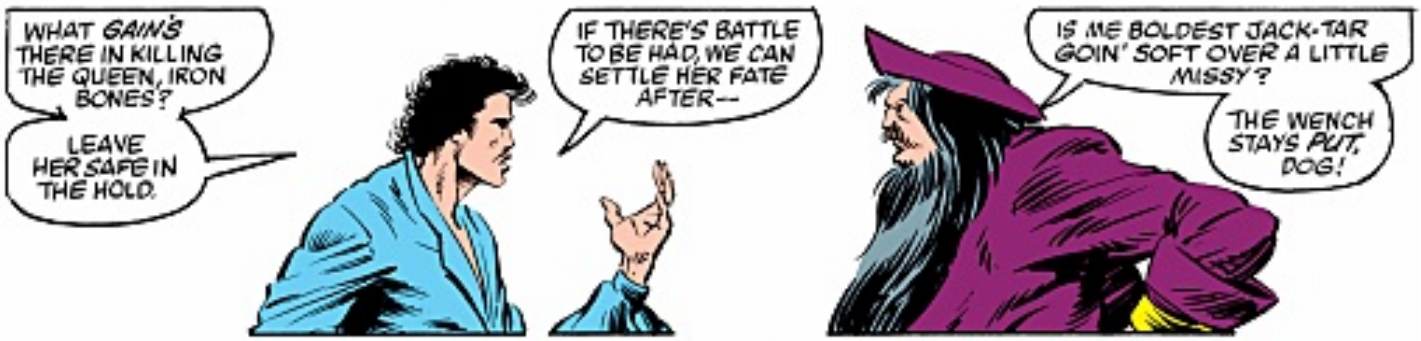
... AND HE BRACES HIMSELF FOR THE SWIFT MAN-EATER--


THE JAGGED SHARKSKIN RIPS HIS FLESH LIKE THORNS...
...BUT THE KING FIGHTS SAVAGELY...


...PLUNGING KEEN STEEL THROUGH RUBBERY CARTILAGE...
...BLEEDING THE SEA-DEVIL TO PIECES.
26


CROM! MY LUNGS ARE BURSTING!
LET ME CLAMBER THAT DECK AND I'LL SPLATTER THEIR BRAINS TO THE WAVES!
KING CONAN, WE'VE QUASHED THE MUTINOUS SEA-DOGS AND LOADED THOSE NOT SLAIN WITH SIXTEEN-POUND IRONS!
LET THE WIND ROAR THROUGH THE RIGGING, THEN!
WE SHOULD ROUND THE BARACHAN ISLES WITHIN TWO DAYS.
SEVERAL DAYS LATER, ABOARD THE BONES AND BLADE...
SAIL, HO! THE LION ENSIGN OF AQUILONIA!
TUMBLE UP HERE, ALL YE DOGS, AND STAND TO!
THERE'LL BE TREASURE OR TREACHERY ABOARD THAT STINKIN' BARGE!
NOW-- BRING THE BLOODY WENCH TOPSIDES AND LASH HER TO THE THE MAST!

HA! WE'LL GIVE YER AQUILONIAN SCUM A GOOD SIGHT O' THEIR ROYAL WENCH!
... SO THEY CAN SEE YE BLEED IF THE RANSOM'S NOT PLEASIN' TA IRON BONES.


WHAT GAIN'S THERE IN KILLING THE QUEEN, IRON BONES?
LEAVE HER SAFE IN THE HOLD.
IF THERE'S BATTLE TO BE HAD, WE CAN SETTLE HER FATE AFTER--
IS ME BOLDEST JACK-TAR GOIN' SOFT OVER A LITTLE MISSY?
THE WENCH STAYS PUT, DOG!

ON GUARD, IRON BONES!
BY THE CUSTOM OF THE COAST I CHALLENGE YOU FOR THIS CRAFT AND CREW!
ME?!
WHY, I'LL CUT OUT YER HEART, YE TRAIT'ROUS RAT, AND SEND YER BLOODY CARCASS TO THE BOTTOM O' THE DEEP!

DAMNATION SEIZE MY SOUL--
--IF I GIVE YOU QUARTER, DOG!
NAY-- THE DEVIL PLUCK MY HEART IF I BEG ANY, IRON BONES!
SNIK!
YAARGH!
BLAST YER EYES, YE SON OF A SEA-HOUND! I'VE WASTED ENOUGH BLOODY TIME--
NOW I'LL SEE THE COLOR OF YER INNARDS!
24

HA! SEA-SCUM! YE DOES WHEEZE LIKE A CREAKIN' OAR LOCK!
CLINK
DROP TO THE DECK SO'S I CAN CRACK YER BACKBONE LIKE A MOLDY PLANK--
NESTOR--
NEVER, IRON BONES!
SWISS
NOT BEFORE MY BLADE SENDS THE WIND WHISTLING...
...THROUGH YOUR BROAD BELLY, CUR!
STAB

YAARGH! CONFOUND YE FER A BLOODY--

TUMP

--SEA-RAT!

THUD

MITRA BE PRAISED!

OVER THE RAIL WITH HIM!

AYE, AYE SIR!

ALL HANDS STAND BY FOR THE *LION OF AQUILONIA* LOOKS TO LOCK US IN BATTLE!

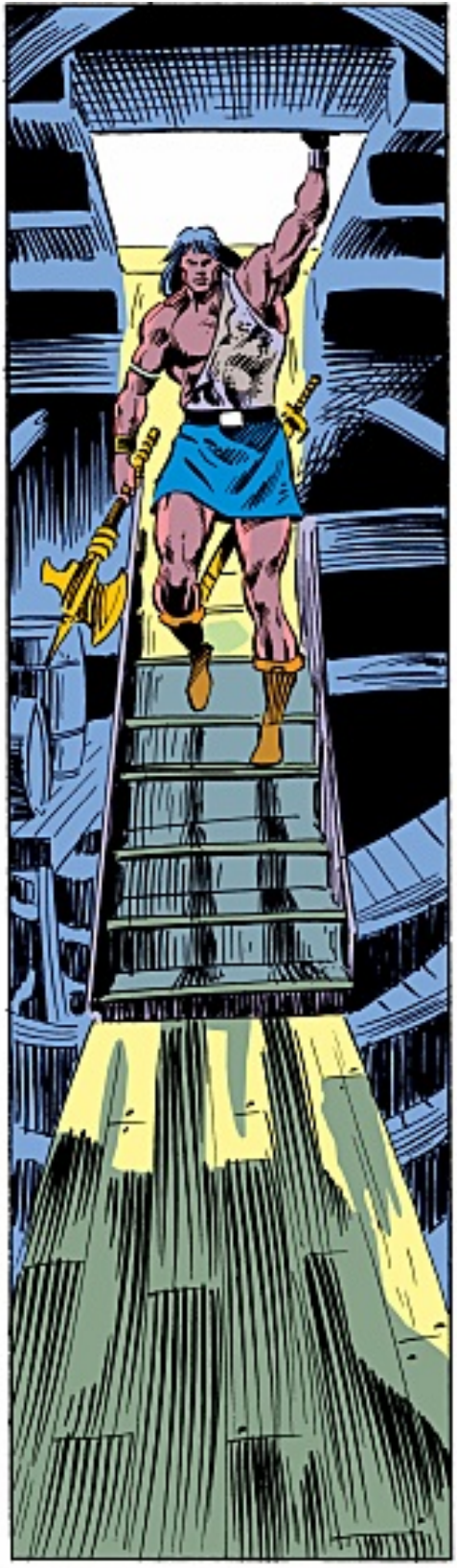
BY LAW OF THE SEA YOU BELONG TO THE SHIP ZENOBIA, AND YOUR RANSOM TO THE *ENTIRE* CREW. I'VE NO AUTHORITY TO RETURN YOU TO CONAN.

NOR *WOULD* I IF I COULD.

I'M GOING TO FIGHT CONAN FOR *YOU!*

NO!

NO--
CAECUS, TAKE QUEEN ZENOBIA BELOW OUT OF HARM'S WAY AND SHIELD HER WITH YOUR VERY LIFE.
AYE-AYE, CAP'N.
AT THAT MOMENT...
MOVE! PASS OUT ARMS!
IS IT WISE, MY LIEGE, TO ARM THE CREW AFTER AN ATTEMPTED MUTINY?
FEAR NOT FOR YOUR DOGS-SOUL, SAILOR.
I'LL SCUTTLE THIS TUB 'TIL SHE LIES OVER UPON HER BEAM-ENDS.
THEN CROM TAKE THE FOOL WHO'LL NOT FIGHT LIKE AN INFERNAL DEMON TO TAKE THE BONES AND BLADE--
--WHILE HIS OWN CRAFT IS SINKING!
32



CRAASH

PLAASH
CRAANSH

NOW, CROM'S DEVILS, JUMP TO IT!

GRAPPLING HOOKS AND BLADES TO THE READY! THEIR CAPTAIN'S MINE-- ABOVE ALL, THE QUEEN MUST NOT BE HARMED!
33

BLUUNK

MEN OF AQUILONIA--ATTACK!

WHERE IS SHE, JACKALS?

WHERE'S MY QUEEN?!

ANSWER ME, SWINE!
34

FALL TO, MEN! SHAVE THE CLAWS OFF AQUILONIA'S LION CUBS!
HO! SO I'VE FOUND THE MANGY CAPTAIN OF THIS TUB!
I'LL HAVE MY QUEEN.
SUCH A BEAUTY DESERVES BETTER THAN YOU.
YOUR BLOOD RUNS HOT AFTER BATTLE, AQUILONIAN, RATHER THAN ZENOBIA'S FEMININE CHARMS!
YOU STOLE YOUR CROWN; YOU STOLE HER LOVE...
...YOU DESERVE NEITHER.
YOU SPEAK RIDDLES.
THE TRUE RIDDLE IS HOW ONE SO BEAUTIFUL AND NOBLE OF SPIRIT...
COULD GIVE HER LOVE TO ONE SO FOUL.

TALK! TALK! TALK!
BUT I'LL SEE YOU HOISTED BY THE ARMS--
--AND DRUBBED WITH A NAKED CUTLASS FOR YOUR RANSOM!
NAY, CONAN, I FIGHT FOR NO RANSOM BUT ZENOBIA HERSELF!
...ZENOBIA..?
CROM! INSOLENT SWINE!
THAK
SKLIT
TO THE DEVIL'S DUNGHEAPS WITH YOU!
36

SOON...
HA! WE'VE GIVEN THIS CREW OF VULTURES A RED RECKONING!
NOW SET COURSE TO PORT!
WHAAM
BLESS MITRA, CONAN! I KNEW YOU'D FIND ME!
STILL, A PRETTY CHASE YOU LED ME, LOVE!
BUT, CROM, THESE SEA-DOGS WERE A HANDSOME QUARRY--
--HA! AND THE LAST I SLEW THOUGHT TO STEAL YOU FOR HIS OWN...
...NESTOR...
ZENOBIA--?
37

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KING CONAN

℅ MARVEL COMICS GROUP
387 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

JIM OWSLEY
EDITOR

Dear KING CONAN Crew,

Well, I must say I've been prompted to write before, but after just finishing KING CONAN #17 I suddenly became compelled to write. In fact, issue #17 has got to be the best since the incredible *"Bones Of The Brown Man"* back in issue #9. I get a fresh new feeling from the mag, and personally feel this to be the best written story so far. There have also been some amazingly good openings made in this story which could indeed lead to some interesting developments. Primarily I speak of Conan and Conn's attraction to Ayelet and its effect on Conan's family life. I'm also intrigued by Ayelet, as I'm sure most other readers are. She's strong and fierce, yet very compassionate. I certainly hope we can look forward to seeing more of her.

Anyway, keep up the fantastic work. It's good to see the quality of the comic go up. More power to Mr. Zelenetz and Mr. Buscema!

Stan Cowan
Halifax, Nova Scotia

We're glad you liked our new woman warrior, Stan. You can count on seeing a lot more of her in the future. In fact, Ayelet next returns in KING CONAN #21... to attend a funeral.

Cimmerians:

KING CONAN is fascinating to me because it shows how well said Cimmerian has aged. It makes me wonder whether his companions in arms of years past have done as well. It would be particularly interesting to have one red-haired she-devil visit Aquilonia's monarch, or will they call her *Gray* Sonja by then...?

Dale Norman Robertson
University of Maryland

Rule *nothing* out, Dale. Although we make no promises, let's just say that suspense is good for the soul. And they wouldn't *dare* call her "Gray".

Gentlebeings:

KING CONAN #16's *"Blood Of Aquilonia"* was very nice. Marc Silvestri and Ricardo Villamonte did a very capable job with the artwork. I'd like to see them continue for a few more issues to see how they fare.

My main concern is with the writing. Always has, always will be. I'm no expert as far as the artwork goes; I just know what I like and what I don't. But where words are concerned, well, I make part of my living by the pen too.

Alan, I like your stuff. *"Blood Of Aquilonia"* was a very good story to herald your debut as scripter for KING CONAN. Although the barbarian king facing rebellion and upsurpers plot is starting to get a little monotonous, combining it with the rite-of-passage/see-the-world experiences of Prince Conn was an excellent idea. My only complaint is I think the story should have been spread over a couple more issues, allowing the reader to more fully experience Conn's awakening to the way other people live. Also allows for better development of mystery and intrigue as King Conan tries to learn the truth behind the rebellion, with a nice buildup towards the climax and denouement.

But, as it is, KING CONAN #16 was quite well done, and I look forward to future issues written by Zelenetz.

Gregg Chamberlain
Burns Lake, B.C.

Gregg, if you thought issue #16 was good... well, stay tuned for things yet undreamed of beginning in the very next issue. Our creative team of Alan Zelenetz and Marc Silvestri have warmed up to the task of chronicling the history of Hyboria's most barbarously unconventional king. It all starts here, next issue. You have been warned.

Dear Jim,

I have been reading KING CONAN since the first issue hit the stands. I really enjoy it. I realize in many movies and comics created from books that liberties are taken, but Conan in general has stayed very close to the Robert E. Howard books. However, since reading KING CONAN I've noticed something I finally had to ask about. Queen Zenobia is very beautifully portrayed, but she has brown hair. In *Conan The Avenger* by Howard, Nyberg, and DeCamp, it says she has black hair. Is there a reason for this?

Don't misunderstand me, I do hope you take *some* liberties with Howard's original storylines, as that would, in my opinion, lead to a longer and more exciting series. Thank you for the good work.

Debra Summers
Webb City, MO

Thank you for the good *letter*, Debra. Zenobia's hair color change was indeed one of a few minor changes we've made in the Howard legend (like King Conan's lack of a beard), for reasons of clarity and/or storytelling. Adapting anything from one medium to another almost always involves the taking of certain liberties, and KING CONAN is no excepetion. As to the *extent* of how much KING CONAN will differ from *Conan Of Aquilonia* and *Conan Of The Isles* (the two paperbacks between which KING CONAN's tales occur)... well, just keep reading, Debra. You're in for a few surprises.

Dear Marvel,

In KING CONAN #16 I was very happy to see Conn have a large part. I would like to see more of Conn in future issues. He should have a larger part because he's Conan's son.

Adam Gesle
Edmonton, Alberta

Dear KING CONAN Crew,

I really like KING CONAN, and one of the things I like about it is Prince Conn. Well, lately Conn hasn't been looking too super. I liked him best in KING CONAN #12, page 9. He is riding into the city with his sword tutor, and he looks great! He looks strong and young. But in KING CONAN #16, Conn looks super old, like his father. Then, in #17, he looks young again! I don't mean to sound overly critical, but what gives?

Patty K.G.
Menlo Park, CA

Well, Patty, over the course of the past year and a half or so, we've been quietly "aging" the young prince from twelve or so years old to where we see him now, about age sixteen. Back in issue #17, when Big John Buscema heroically stepped in to save us all from the Dreaded Deadline Doom, he penciled the young prince as he'd always drawn him years before, as a boy of twelve. As usual, our keen, ever-vigilant, faithful post-MMMS True Believing readers have more on the ball than ye editors, and for your letter Patty a No-Prize your way comes. Gee... can't sneak anything past you people, can we...?

Incidentally, all you Prince Conn fans, see below for a special announcement, and, whatever you do, don't miss next issue. See you in sixty.

THE PRINCE IS DEAD

Once in a very blue moon you get the chance to do something great. Not just great, but Great. With a capital "G". What I mean is, an accomplishment of lasting value that makes people sit up and take notice. Something that leaves the competition staring with their mouths open. **KING CONAN #20** is just such an accomplishment.

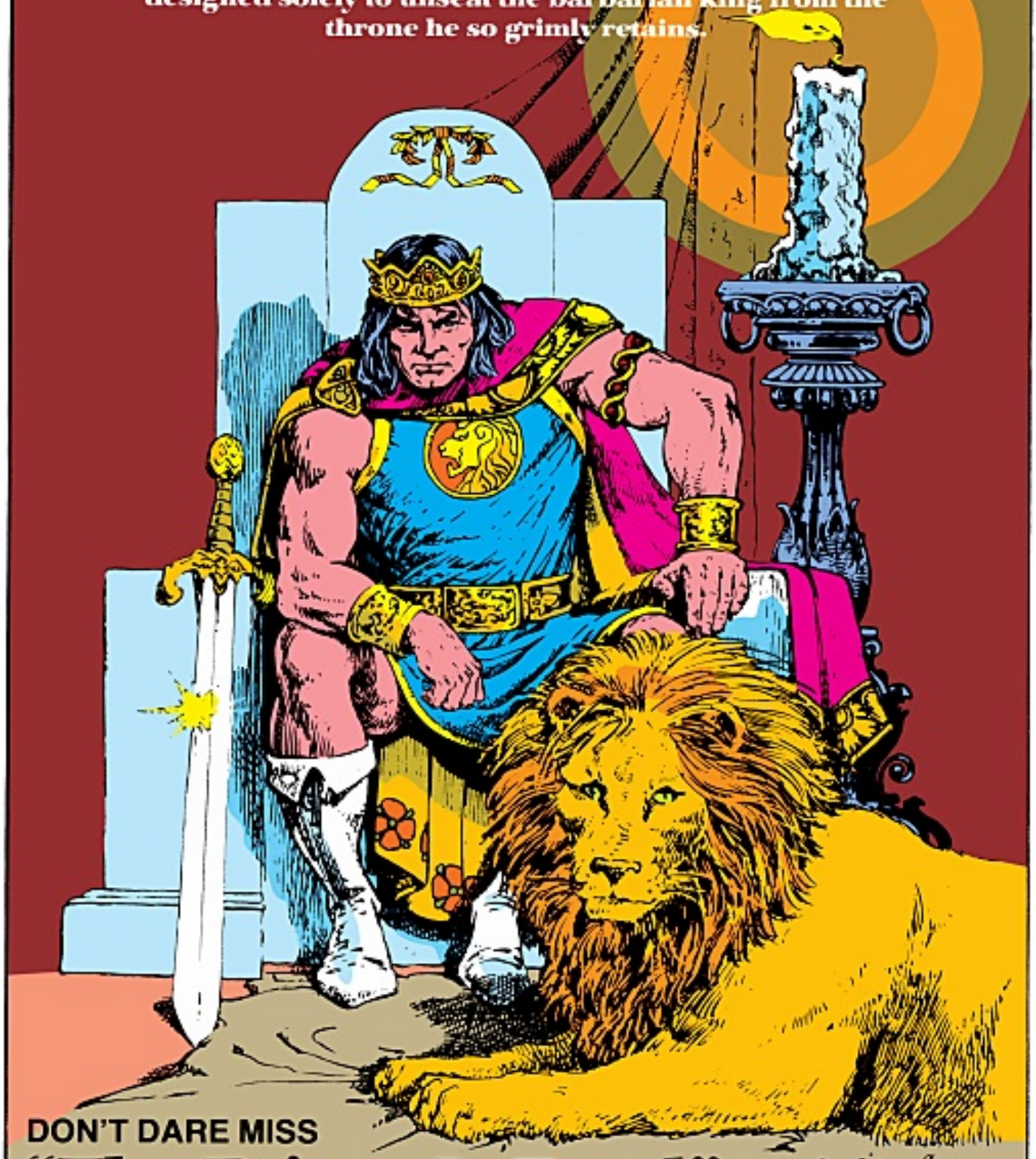
For the past ten months, **Alan Zelenetz, Marc Silvestri** and I have been hammering out a new look and a fresh, new concept for **KING CONAN**; one that would breathe new life into the series as well as chart new ground. Next issue begins the awesome saga of Conan's latter reign as king. Treacherous court intrigue, scheming malefactors, wars and rumors of wars are all brought to bear in coming issues as the greying Cimmerian's past finally catches up to him. Take nothing for granted, folks. This is Conan as you've *never* seen him. Fasten your seat belts.

It all begins next issue. In sixty days, the fruits of nearly a year's labor will roll off the press and race towards your local newsstand. Don't miss this one, people. This is destined to be the collector's item issue that all future issues of **KING CONAN** will be compared with. Get together with a few of your friends and find out the truck route from Sparta, Illinois to your local store. Form checkpoints along the way to insure unimpeeded delivery to your neighborhood. I don't care how you do it, but DON'T MISS NEXT ISSUE! Buy at *least* one copy. Treat someone you love (or at least are mildly acquainted with) to a copy. They'll thank you for it.

What I'm trying to say here (and have been saying for six months now) is if you've never been into sword and sorcery before; if you never thought a barbarian book was for you, we're out to prove you dead wrong. This is *still* the Marvel Age of comics. Accept no mohawked substitutes.

Jim Owsley

On September 6, 1983 Stan Lee and the Marvel Comics Group will release a double-sized, epic-length tale that will transport you back to a time long lost, and beyond your wildest imaginings. An age undreamed of, where a man often called a thief, reaver, and slayer rules the mightiest kingdom of the realm, having treaded the jeweled thrones of the earth under his sandaled feet. This tale marks a new beginning, an unspeakable end, and the outset of a reign of terror designed solely to unseat the barbarian king from the throne he so grimly retains.



DON'T DARE MISS

"The Prince Is Dead"

KING CONAN #20. ON SALE EVERYWHERE.

~Silvestri and Severin~

WHAT IF? #34 (August 1982)

Eliot R. Brown lampoons King Conan and Bing Crosby in this one-page feature from *What If?*'s all-parody issue.

Writer: ELIOT BROWN Artists: ELIOT BROWN and JOE SINNOTT

KING CONAN #1, HOUSE AD
From April 1980 titles

BECAUSE YOU DEMANDED IT!

In 1970, there was CONAN THE BARBARIAN #1.
In 1974, there was SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN #1.

AND NOW, THERE'S A *THIRD* MAGNIFICENT COMIC-MAGAZINE FEATURING THE WORLD'S GREATEST SWORD-AND-SORCERY HERO!

ROY THOMAS, JOHN BUSCEMA, and ERNIE CHAN team up again—to bring you the awesome adventures of Conan, king of Aquilonia—and of Prince Conn, the

SON OF CONAN!

ON SALE NOW—A QUARTERLY BLOCKBUSTER!

KING CONAN #2, HOUSE AD
From *The Savage Sword of Conan* #52 (May 1980)

BECAUSE YOU DEMANDED IT!

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In 1974, there was SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN #1.

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LIFE AMONG THE BARBARIANS

by Neil Patterson

The early 1970's saw the comic book advent of literature's greatest barbarian hero, Robert E. Howard's *Conan*. The early tales of the Cimmerian by Roy Thomas and Barry Smith achieved popularity with incredible speed, and eventually almost every comic book publisher had entered the sword-and-sorcery/fantasy field. None of these efforts, though, ever approached the wide-spread success that Conan attained, to the point where the Cimmerian even overshadowed his spiritual brothers, *King Kull* and *Red Sonja*, both of whom underwent several incarnations with only moderate success (although Sonja, under Frank Thorne's pencils, became something of a cult favorite for a time).

Conan has continued to blossom, being published under three different titles: The original color comic, the bi-monthly *King Conan*, and the black-and-white title, *Savage Sword of Conan*.

And now Kull and Sonja will once again be getting the attention many have felt they've long deserved. Both will be stars on a yearly basis in their own bi-monthly titles published four times a year (Sonja as a $1.00, 48 page title, and *Kull the Conqueror*, as 48 page, $1.25 book on high-quality Mando paper).

The odd publication schedule is a result of Marvel's need to fulfill a contractual obligation to Conan Properties, Inc., Conan's legal "parents," according to Kull editor Ralph Macchio. The contract could have been honored with mere reprints, but Macchio emphasises, "We're doing the books this way because we're committed to doing a very classy barbarian book. It would be easy to say nobody cares about Kull, nobody reads it, let's just get this thing out of here as quickly as we can — and concentrate of *Conan*. But that's not what we're doing."

But how to take characters that have lived in the sizeable shadow of Conan and bring their popularity up to par with the Cimmerian? In both the case of Kull and Sonja, editors Macchio and Larry Hama went back to basics. Hama describes Sonja in these terms: "She really doesn't make much sense without the context of Conan. She was created as a foil — and taking her away from Conan is like those spin-offs from popular TV series that never work.

"You see, Conan is basically stupid. That was Howard's whole point in the first place. Howard wanted to do a character who didn't necessarily think his way out of things. The way that relates to Sonja: Sonja isn't as strong as Conan. She has to make up for that with skill, and a bit more brains. She's got to be able to outwit people."

In addition, Hama sees Sonja as a more mysterious woman than she was presented in her last incarnation. "I want to bring back the mysterious element that was there when she first showed up in the color Conan book. Sort of — who was that strange girl?' She should be a little more stand-offish, a little more haughty. She should be sure of herself... and therefore not need anybody else. When we start to get to know too much about her, her little foibles, we start to loose that distance. I don't think that's good. It's sort of like knowing what the Lone Ranger eats for breakfast."

Macchio describes Kull as the barbarian character he likes best. "I see no reason why Kull cannot be successful if done as Kull. Granted there have been problems in the past, but I feel that during a number of periods — particularly the time that Marie and John Severin were drawing it — that it was really the highest quality barbarian book being put out. I always found Kull a more interesting,

by Neil Patterson

more three-dimensional type of guy than Conan. I thought there was more potential in him. When the Doug Moench-John Bolton Kull story became the second-best selling *Bizarre Adventures* issue ever (only the X-Men issue surpassed it), that told me there was room for Kull — a man on a throne who is really uncomfortable with that power. And yet he killed to get that power. I find that a fascinating idea."

Alan Zelenetz, currently writing both *King Conan* and *Kull*, agrees with Macchio on Kull's more complex nature, compared to Conan. "Conan is a man with native intelligence; he's bright, and seems to be something of a natural linguist — but he seldom thinks past his current actions. He's not filled with ambition. Conan sort of stumbles across the throne of Aquilonia, while Kull actively pursued it. Unlike Conan, Kull likes and, indeed, is intrigued by civilization and the vast stores of knowledge it offers."

Zelenetz says the key to Kull is in the very words that Howard used when writing about him. "The words 'meditate', 'imagine', and 'dream' keep coming up again and again in Howard's Kull stories. Before and after the action sequences in a Kull story, Kull will frequently have a philosophical discussion with his associates about the nature of their actions, usually regarding reality versus illusion. And that is the real theme to the Kull stories: *deception* — intellectual and physical deception."

Macchio says Kull differs from Conan in the Cimmerian's own time as ruler of Aquilonia because Kull is very unsure of himself as king. "Kull is a guy who wanted all this power. He had a sense of destiny about taking this throne. At the same time, as I've said, he's been uncomfortable with the power since he's taken over — which Conan is not when he becomes king. Conan is fully aware and fully secure in the knowledge that he's king... and when he leaves Aquilonia, I don't think he expects usurpation for an instant. I think every time Kull leaves Valusia, he worries that there are assassins at his back. One of the things I like about Kull is that there's still so much that he doesn't know about where he is. Even in the castle he presumably rules from, there's all sorts of hidden passages, things he was not even aware of. It's almost like he's running a ship, but he doesn't know where all the doors lead."

Macchio says that Kull's lack of knowledge and uncertainty will come out in stories of palace intrigue. "The kind of stories that I most like are those that deal with politics — whether in medieval Europe or current-day Washington, or whatever. Stories about people with power and how they manipulate others to get and keep that power. I really like the relationship among Kull and his circle of friends and advisors, Tu, Brule, and Canub. We even want to enlarge that circle of people, to see how Kull really handles diplomacy." Macchio says Kull's image as a king is amorphous because previous writers have never really had him act like one. "It seems that whenever we see Kull on the throne he's bored, because he has to fine somebody for littering on the street or something. Yet this guy is a *king*. What does that mean? What sort of things does he have to be aware of? How does he know who his friends and enemies are? And how long is he going to be able to keep the throne? Those are some of the things I'd like to deal with in *Kull*."

Conan has been and remains a big success — but still Hama isn't completely happy with it. "I don't think the original Howard stuff has been done justice by anybody. What Roy Thomas wrote, for all it was, wasn't Howard. It lacked a lot of the gristle, that raw power, and anger, and the feeling of brute force, that was very evident in the Howard stuff. Some of the more 'Lovecraftian' comics stories have

tried to capture that feel a bit. You know, Howard was a big Lovecraft freak. That whole 'evil-older-than-the-earth', things-lurking-in-the-darkness, the whole Cthulhu-esque thing has to be explored a bit more."

Essentially, complains Hama, what's been missing from *Conan* has been monsters and sorcery with a purpose. "A lot of the monsters Conan's faced in the last few years have been just cardboard cutouts. I think a monster like that without the back up that's integral to the story is just senseless. It becomes a 1950's science-fiction film — a guy in a rubber suit."

As an editor, Hama also has to keep in mind the differing audiences for the three Conan titles. What works in one boook may not work in another. "A lot of store owners won't sell *Savage Sword* to a lot of small kids. So it's really aimed at a slightly older audience. Therefore it can be a bit more violent, a bit more suggestive, a little bit more sophisticated as to plot and characters.

With the color Conan book, we're talking about a much wider audience range — much younger kids up to about the same age as read *Savage Sword*. Therefore the type of story has to be appropriate so it's understandable by the whole range. I'd say *King Conan* is about the same age range as the color Conan book."

The books deal with different periods in the Cimmerian's life which affects the story content as well in *Conan the Barbarian*, he's still a young man, perhaps thirty or so. In *King Conan*, he's in his fifties, firmly seated on the Aquilonian throne. And *Savage Swords* free to deal with any part of the hero's life. Hama says, "My feeling is that in *King Conan* we deal with more social-issue type stories. It tends to get a little more soap-opera-ish... and the regular Conan color book is basically your formula monsters, occult evil, and so on. Political intrigue and things like that are in *King Conan*, because they're part of court life. In that sense, it's more like *Kull*. The regular Conan title is more straightforward adventure. In *Savage Sword* we can really be sort of experimental. We can try different types of stories. With the format of fifty-page stories, we like to get an epic feel — to have him travel and see exotic places — an Odysseus like adventure."

Each editor sums up his characters differently, forced in part to compare Kull and Sonja to Conan. So starting with Conan, Hama says "... basically stupid. Conan is not a cerebral, thinking man's hero. He's a guy who, when trapped in a room, doesn't consider strategy — he just bursts his way out." And Sonja? "The difference between Conan and Red Sonja is the difference between Fritz Lieber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. Brains and brawn."

Macchio sees the difference between Kull and Conan as a difference in psychological outlook. "He's a thinking barbarian. We can make it as powerful as Conan and yet have a cerebral edge to it. Kull can be as barbaric as hell and at the same time, there's some quality that makes him pull back and look at things, and see them differently. That same quality makes him a visionary, with a sense of destiny Conan doesn't have."

Finally, Hama sums up what it takes to write heroic fantasy. "Part of what's gotten lost in sword-and-sorcery comics is that writers took over who weren't interested in that particular mythos. And in comics it's often not the writer's skills that are important, so much as a belief in the material. You can get mediocre guys that believe in something doing a better job than somebody who's an incredible wordsmith that doesn't believe in it."

KING CONAN #4, PAGE 33, ORIGINAL ART

Pencils by John Buscema; Inks by Danny Bulanadi

Courtesy Heritage Auctions.com

KING CONAN #6, PAGE 36, ORIGINAL ART
by Ernie Chan

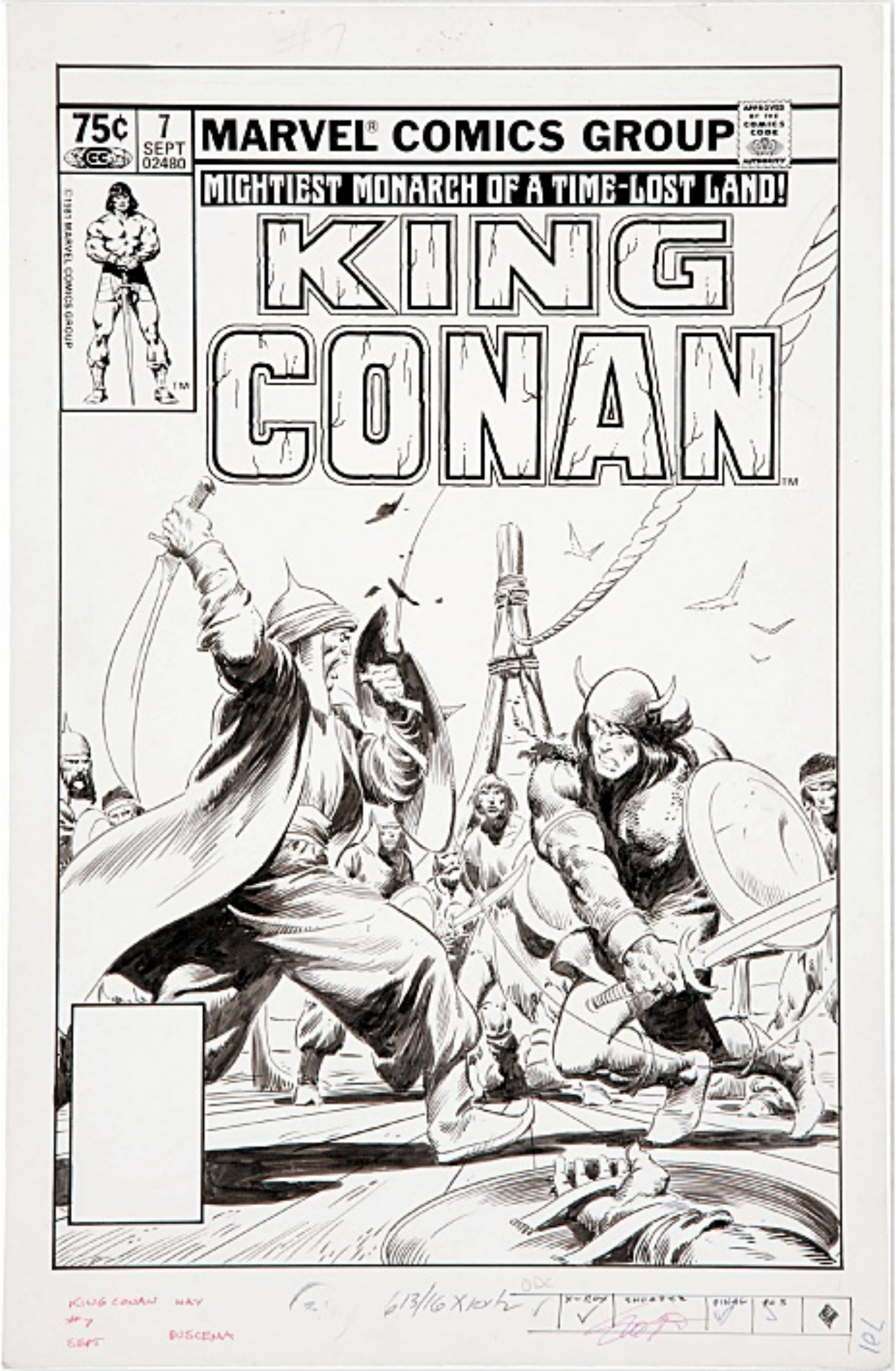
Courtesy Heritage Auctions.com

KING CONAN #9, PAGE 28, ORIGINAL ART

Pencils by John Buscema; Inks by Ernie Chan

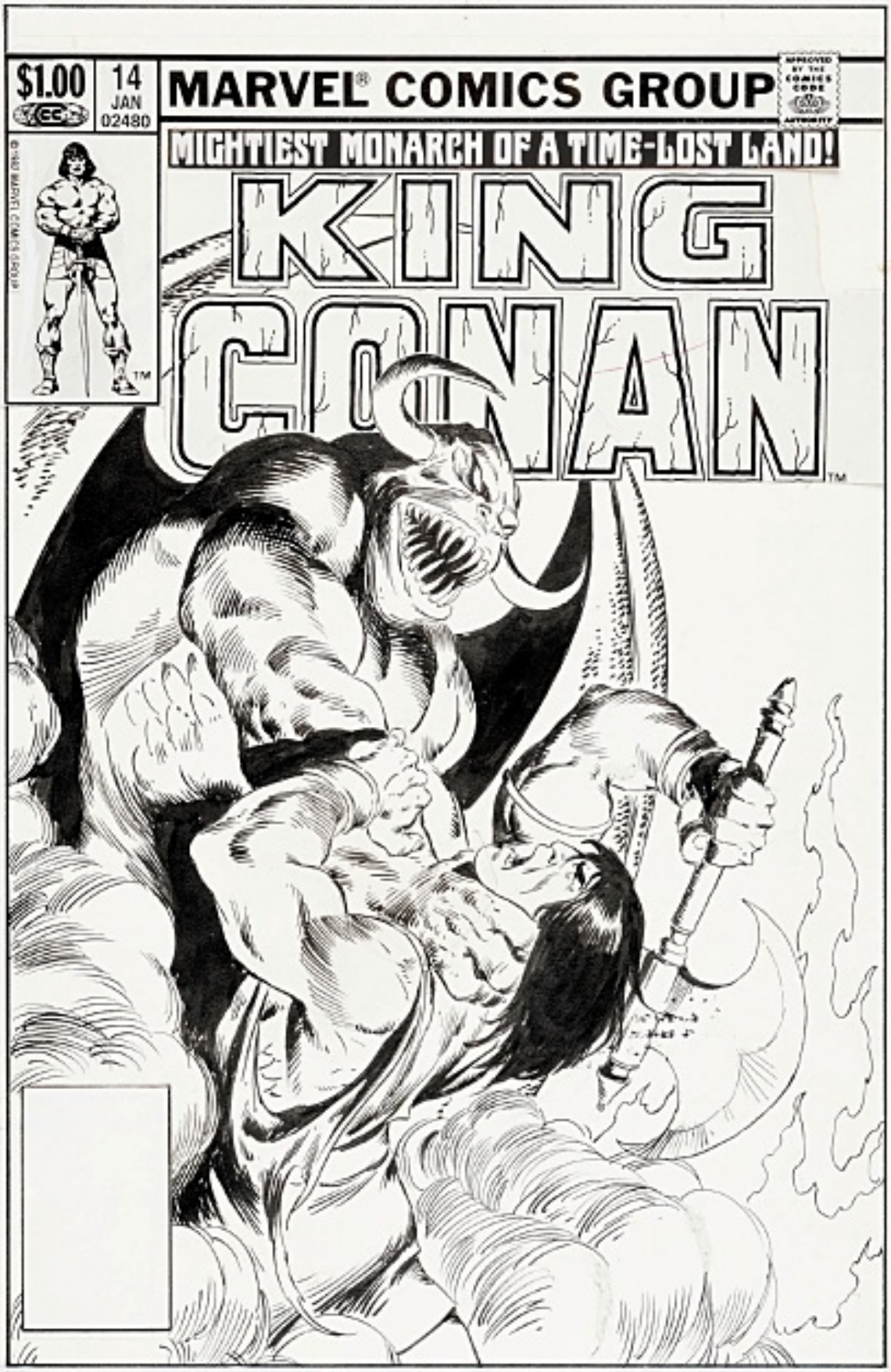
Courtesy Heritage Auctions.com

KING CONAN #7, COVER, ORIGINAL ART
by John Buscema



Courtesy Heritage Auctions.com

KING CONAN #14, COVER, ORIGINAL ART
by John Buscema



KING CONAN #14
September Swiddle
January 1993

John Buscema

89 6 13/16" x 10 1/2"

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Courtesy Heritage Auctions.com

CONAN THE KING: THE ORIGINAL MARVEL YEARS OMNIBUS VOL. 1 (JUNE 2022) COVER
by Kaare Andrews

BARBARIAN... THIEF... MERCENARY... AND NOW – CONAN IS KING!

CONAN'S MARVEL ADVENTURES ARE BACK AND LOOKING BETTER THAN EVER – REMASTERED TO THEIR ORIGINAL COLORING!

T+

MARVEL

Collecting *King Conan* #1-19